

Birkett House Special School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	120351
Local Authority	Leicestershire
Inspection number	313584
Inspection dates	24–25 June 2008
Reporting inspector	Frank Price

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	5–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	107
6th form	20
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Rosemary Lowe
Headteacher	Steve Welton
Date of previous school inspection	25 May 2004
School address	Launceston Road Wigston LE18 2FZ
Telephone number	01162 885802
Fax number	01162 571932

Age group	5-19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Birkett House School educates pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties. Nearly a third of the pupils have autistic spectrum disorders. A small group of pupils have multi-sensory impairments. The school has residential facilities for pupils. Although the school's age range includes children in the Foundation Stage, there were no pupils of this age on roll at the time of the inspection, so this stage is not reported. The school has four separate locations. Some pupils are based in the original special school. A group of seven pupils in Key Stage 2 are included in a nearby primary school and two pupils in Key Stage 3 are included in a high school. The building used by 20 Key Stage 4 and post-16 students is located on a 14–19 college campus.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Birkett House School is an outstandingly effective school. The reason it is so successful is because the headteacher has been determined to strive for continual improvement, despite the inadequacies of the accommodation of the school's main site. Indeed, this has been turned into an opportunity. Alternative provision has been sought for groups of pupils in a variety of other establishments, so that they can be taught alongside pupils in mainstream schools or college.

Pupils make outstanding progress as a result of excellent teaching. A strong feature of teaching is the adoption of a 'total communication environment' where signing, symbols, objects and information and communication technology (ICT) are used to assist pupils' understanding and communicative abilities. As a result, pupils are confident communicators. Teachers use ICT exceptionally well to enhance students' learning. In one lesson, for example, older students used their laptops to surf the internet and find relevant information. The excellent curriculum places a strong emphasis on promoting pupils' personal development and their skills of communication, numeracy, literacy and ICT. Pupils' self-esteem and confidence are boosted by the wide range of accredited awards they can achieve, and the school's motto of 'Challenge, Achieve, Celebrate' sums up its drive for improvement. Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school and many parents commented upon the excellent progress their children make at school. One parent stated, 'since my son has been at this school, he has made fantastic progress.'

The care, guidance and support offered to pupils are first-rate. Staff know pupils exceptionally well and provide careful and sensitive support so that pupils can access learning as independently as possible, without becoming over-reliant on adults. As a result, pupils' personal development is excellent. Pupils develop healthy and safe lifestyles as much as they are able to. They value one another and are enthusiastic learners. They eagerly participate in lessons, particularly when they share learning with their peers in other schools and in the college. The sharing of learning with a range of other pupils in different schools has paid dividends, so that pupils' interpersonal and speaking and listening skills have improved substantially. Lessons are carefully planned so that the needs of pupils from the special school and those from the mainstream school are all met and both groups benefit from working together.

The leadership of the headteacher is excellent. He provides well judged operational and strategic leadership of a complex establishment. He is very well supported by senior leaders and governors and a strong sense of teamwork pervades the school. The barriers to learning presented by the poor accommodation are minimised with great skill and forethought. Monitoring and evaluation of the work of the school is excellent. Actions taken as a result of this have led the school to make well-judged improvements. The school has an excellent capacity to continue its outstanding work and further develop opportunities for more pupils to be educated alongside pupils in mainstream schools.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

Students achieve exceptionally well in gaining an increasing number and range of accredited qualifications. These awards present high levels of challenge for students. For example, two able students achieved GCSE grades in drama. Students achieve a wide range of accredited

awards, irrespective of their abilities. The location of post-16 students on a mainstream college campus provides valuable opportunities for them to develop their maturity and their social and independence skills exceptionally well. They also have good opportunities to develop their vocational and academic skills, for example in science, drama and technology, through the courses they attend at the college.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 9

At the time of the inspection, no children were taught as part of the Foundation Stage.

Effectiveness of boarding provision

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 8

The school's residential provision promotes pupils' independence outstandingly and they gain the skills they need to help promote their independence, such as cooking, ironing and shopping. Some pupils use an 'independent living flat' for weekends where they practise their skills and learn to become more self-sufficient. There are close links between care and education, so that consistent strategies are followed to help pupils with their behaviour, personal targets such as feeding, and communication skills. This provision does much to promote pupils' personal and academic development very well. A wide range of leisure activities is provided for pupils in the evening, including cookery, discos and art. Plans to refurbish showering and toileting facilities are imminent. The residential provision promotes pupils' economic well-being very effectively by equipping them with essential skills for the future.

What the school should do to improve further

- Work with the local authority to overcome the inadequacies of Birkett House accommodation.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Standards on entry to the school are exceptionally low, because of pupils' severe, profound and complex learning needs. Their achievement and progress, however, are outstanding, particularly in communication skills and in speaking and listening, which are developed exceptionally well in inclusive settings. Pupils make excellent progress in developing their independence, when mixing with a wide range of other pupils and students and through the school's residential provision. Pupils in Key Stage 4 achieve exceptionally well in a range of accredited academic and vocational courses. Challenge is provided for more able students in the form of entry-level certificate courses. Pupils with multi-sensory impairments make good progress in generalising their skills in a range of different situations. A very high percentage of pupils achieve their individual targets in mathematics and English. Pupils' progress is very good in ICT and in non-literacy based subjects such as drama, design and technology, food technology and physical education. Comparative data has been used to measure pupils' progress against similar pupils very effectively and the school has a clear view of the pupils' rate of progress. Pupils of all abilities, gender and ethnicity achieve equally well.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Through the well-planned curriculum, visits and special times such as assemblies, pupils' cultural and spiritual development is excellent. Pupils' outstanding social and moral development is greatly enhanced in lessons, breaks, and lunchtimes by the excellent relationships they have with adults and with each other. They show confidence and trust in the adults who support them. Pupils' behaviour is good and those pupils who have challenging behaviour are well managed by staff. The school council gives pupils a good experience of working together for the benefit of the school community, for example in helping to choose the new headteacher and raising money for classroom games. Programmes in personal, social and health education underpin much of the school's work and these have a significant impact on pupils' high levels of achievement in their personal skills, their knowledge about the advantages of a healthy lifestyle and about their own safety. They learn, for instance, about the importance of having a diet which includes fruit and water. When making choices in cafeteria systems in mainstream schools, pupils are prepared effectively and given guidance to help them choose. Pupils feel safe and secure in school. Attendance is good and pupils enjoy coming to school. They are well prepared for life after school through activities such as residential experiences, work experience and a highly appropriate emphasis on social and life skills.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Teaching has many exemplary features. The use of alternative and augmentative methods of communication is excellent. This ensures pupils' understanding and opportunities for expressive communication are maximised. The relationships between staff and pupils are good-natured and supportive. Every opportunity is taken to celebrate pupils' achievement to encourage them to do even better. Some pupils have challenging behaviours and these are sensitively managed by staff. Teachers and classroom assistants work closely together to provide seamless support for pupils. Teachers have created well-rehearsed routines, which is particularly important for pupils who have autistic spectrum disorders. Pupils derive a sense of predictability which helps them to manage themselves more effectively. Information and communication technology is used extremely well, both to enhance teaching and learning and to provide pupils with communication devices such as speech output devices. Teachers are skilled in making lessons practical and interesting so that they engage pupils' attention. For example, in one mathematics lesson, pupils enjoyed counting and recognising numbers by bowling a ball at skittles.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Pupils have excellent opportunities to widen their experiences at local primary and secondary schools. They have access to a greater range of subject specialists and facilities, particularly in secondary schools. The curriculum is carefully matched to pupils of all abilities, including those

with multi-sensory impairments. It is significantly enriched by trips and events, adding considerably to the pupils' enjoyment of school. There is an extensive range of extra-curricular activities that provide very good experiences for pupils; these include visits locally to museums, art galleries, theatres local and wider community and participation in interschool competitions. Collaboration with the local performing arts college has resulted in some exceptionally creative activities. Pupils using the residential provision also have the opportunity to extend their social skills and learn to become more independent. The arrangements for vocational and work-related learning are outstanding. The opportunities for all pupils to gain appropriate accreditation are excellent. Pupils have access to a well-organised work-experience programme.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school places the individual pupil at the centre of everything it does and as a result, outstanding levels of care, guidance and support are given to all. The residential provision is excellent and is a lifeline to parents. The partnership between parents and the school is very strong. Parents are kept fully involved in decisions about their children's education, targets and personal development. The school works in close collaboration with education and health professionals and other outside agencies in meeting pupils' specific needs. Academic, personal and social progress is assessed throughout the day and this information is used very well to map out the next steps in pupils' learning. Wherever possible, pupils are made aware of how well they are doing. All adults are vigilant in implementing the arrangements for child protection as well as the school's health and safety procedures.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The headteacher provides confident and assured leadership. He is relentless in his pursuit of school improvement and is determined that every moment of the school day is maximised for the pupils' benefit. His passion for inclusion permeates the rest of the staff, and there is a clear vision and direction to further develop the inclusion of more pupils into other mainstream schools. The headteacher has established a varied and highly suitable pattern of inclusive provision for pupils, ranging from primary to post-16. These satellite groups at the other schools and college promote pupils' academic and personal development extremely well.

The school has a wealth of assessment information, which it uses very effectively to pinpoint areas for further development. This easy-to-understand information in turn has helped the governors to monitor the work of the school effectively, so that they have a clear view of the strengths and areas for development of the school. The analysis of this assessment data is clear and concise and has been perceptively used to make improvements, for example to the provision of music across the school. Governors are committed, supportive and knowledgeable, and challenge and support the school in equal measure.

The headteacher and governors have made every effort to improve the poor facilities of the main site, but these still remain inadequate and inappropriate for pupils. The school's

self-evaluation is accurate and highlights clearly its strengths and areas for improvement and informs the school improvement planning process very effectively.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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?	1	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	NA	
The effectiveness of boarding provision	1	
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	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	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
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	2	
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?	1	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?	1	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	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
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	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
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

26 June 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Birkett House School, Wigston LE18 2FZ

I enjoyed my visit to your school and meeting and talking with you. There are lots of exciting things going on at your school and the opportunities you have to share your lessons with pupils from other schools and colleges are excellent.

You all make excellent progress, especially in your communication skills and becoming independent. The teaching you receive is outstanding. Your teachers and support staff are very skilled at making your lessons really interesting and you enjoy your learning. You are taught the right things and you have very good opportunities to gain awards in your courses as you get older. You are looked after extremely well, both in school and when you stay over at nights and weekends. Staff know you very well and they know how to get the best out of you. Your personal development is outstanding. You make extremely good progress in becoming mature young people and you are polite and friendly and express your views confidently.

Your headteacher, along with other members of staff and governors, has worked very hard to make the school excellent. Together, they have done a fantastic job in bringing about the range of classes that take place in other schools and college. To make the school even better, I have asked your headteacher and the governors to work with the local authority to improve the accommodation at Birkett House.

You can play your part in maintaining your excellent school by continuing to work hard and enjoying lessons. I wish you well for the future.

Yours sincerely

Frank Price Lead inspector

26 June 2008



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Lead inspector