

Nunnykirk Centre for Dyslexia

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	122390
Local Authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	314285
Inspection date	8 November 2007
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	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	9–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	40
6th form	5
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Trevelyn
Headteacher	Mr Simon Dalby-Ball
Date of previous school inspection	1 January 2004
School address	Netherwitton Morpeth Northumberland NE61 4PB
Telephone number	01670 772685
Fax number	01670 772434

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

Nunnykirk is a day and residential school for pupils with specific learning difficulties, primarily dyslexia. About a half of pupils are privately funded, the rest currently come from eight different local authorities. Pupils come from a wide range of backgrounds and from an area that currently ranges from the English Midlands to Southern Scotland. They are usually of average ability, but all have been underachieving in previous schools, not only because of their learning difficulties, but also because of associated social and emotional factors. The result of this is that attainment on entry is usually very low. Nearly all pupils are White British. The sixth form was founded two years ago. There are 17 boys who currently board, usually because they live too far away to travel daily. Residential provision is being extended to girls in the near future.

Most pupils are admitted other than at the usual time of entry to school. A few arrive in the later stages of Key Stage 2 and many more arrive towards the end of Key Stage 3. In a small school such as this cohorts are tiny, so targets focus on individuals rather than groups.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Nunnykirk is a good school with a wonderful, outstanding ethos. It has been the salvation of many young people, helping them to thrive academically, socially and emotionally and opening up opportunities for success on leaving school, by instilling in them a strong sense of self-worth and value to society. Parents are hugely supportive. Their faith in, and gratitude for the school's work, shine through in their many testimonials. To any visitor, and to nearly all of the pupils, the school presents a calm, safe and happy oasis.

Pupils achieve well because they are well taught and the outstanding care, support and guidance extended to them help to capitalise upon their underlying ability, which has often previously been masked. Teachers have an excellent understanding of the difficulties pupils face in their learning and personal development and small class groupings allow for considerable individual attention. Good progress is seen across all subjects in the good curriculum, but especially so in subjects such as art and design, photography and the performing arts, where the nature of pupils' learning difficulties has least impact. Most pupils considerably improve their reading skills because of the emphasis placed on this and the skill of teachers in promoting it.

The pupils are a delight. Most are articulate, friendly and thoughtful. They are welcoming of visitors and proud of their school. A few have had particularly bad previous experiences which have tainted their views of schooling, but nearly all enjoy coming to this school and their confidence grows enormously. Exemplary behaviour leads to the school becoming a safe haven in which pupils thrive, free from worry. Pupils attend whenever they can and many boarders make light of the journey times they endure each weekend, which are sometimes considerable. Healthy living is central to the school's philosophy. Physical activity and a sense of adventure are strongly encouraged and pupils relish the wholesome, homely cooking that emerges each day from the school's kitchen. There is a tremendous sense of community within the school. Its geographical remoteness tends to conspire against more extensive links with the broader community. Pupils are well prepared for moving on when they leave the school.

The school is well led and managed. A change in headship, with effect from September 2008, has recently been announced. Well-considered action by the governing body means the current headteacher has ample time to share his considerable expertise with the incoming headteacher. Leaders, managers and governors have a good understanding of their school's strengths and the aspects it needs to develop further. This has ensured that the school has improved well since the last inspection. They think well ahead to ensure that pupils are well served in the best environment that can be provided. For example, new classrooms and specialist facilities are due to be developed as soon as funding can be secured. Following the recommendations of the previous inspection, teaching and learning are now monitored more formally. This monitoring is satisfactory, but is too general and does not focus enough on evaluating specific aspects of teaching identified in the school improvement plan.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form has rapidly established itself as an important part of the school. It has been a popular addition amongst students, parents and staff. Students are encouraged to take on increasing responsibility for their learning and actions, and to offer support to younger or newer pupils. This makes a particularly good contribution to their personal development. The extra

two years that students spend in the sixth form help them to complete GCSE courses or to improve their grades and also allows them to further their studies towards Advanced Level qualifications. They achieve well because of good teaching. Although no lessons were observed during the inspection, its quality was judged through analysis of students' work and school data. The curriculum reflects the early stages of this provision and is satisfactory. It is somewhat dominated by fine art and photography and, although some advances are being made in providing a range of work based training opportunities, the current curriculum does not offer enough to meet the needs of pupils with a more vocational bent. In all other respects, the sixth form reflects the good quality of provision, leadership and management found across the whole school.

What the school should do to improve further

- Broaden the sixth form curriculum by providing more opportunities for students to gain vocational skills.
- Link the monitoring and evaluation of teaching more closely to priorities for improvement identified in the school improvement plan.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Pupils' achievement is good. The nature of their difficulties and their frequently low attainment on entry mean that few attain national standards by the end of Year 11, but all pupils gain meaningful qualifications which stand them in good stead for future success in the workplace. Parents are unanimous in feeling that their children are making the progress that they expect of them and are extremely grateful to the school for unleashing their children's potential.

The youngest pupils nearly all make good progress, especially in improving their reading skills. They do this because of good, specialised teaching. Understandably, the school feels that these pupils would gain little by undertaking the national tests or assessments at this stage. Throughout Key Stage 3, pupils continue to make good progress. Nearly all meet their individual target of advancing by at least one level of the National Curriculum in all subjects. Speaking and listening skills often come on in leaps and bounds. Reading improves, but gains in writing skills are more intermittent. Last year, Key Stage 4 pupils comfortably exceeded expectations. Every Year 11 pupil gained five or more GCSE passes, over a half of them in the A* to C range. Last summer, the first sixth former achieved A level successes in art and photography. More are anticipated to follow this year, but the range of courses has not been radically extended and does not sufficiently recognise the potential achievements of pupils who might be talented in other spheres.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Pupils' personal development and well-being are outstanding. Their excellent spiritual, moral, social and cultural development defines the wonderful ethos of the school. Parents are overflowing with praise for the way in which their children are helped to grow in confidence and for the fact that, often for the first time in many years, they have found happiness and contentment at school. Pupils find the school a haven. They enjoy their lessons and the huge

variety of activities that are arranged after school each day, many of which promote the development of hobbies. Excellent behaviour contributes enormously to the settled, safe atmosphere of the school. Pupils relish the healthy, wholesome meals that are produced, often containing ingredients produced by pupils themselves in the rural studies area. Physical activity is strongly promoted. There is a high level of participation in a wide range of team games and nearly all pupils have represented the school at some point over the past year. This is a magnificent achievement. Community spirit within the school is excellent, pupils fully appreciating the fact that the school is there for their benefit and that the more they contribute, either through ideas or actions, such as creating climbing and swinging apparatus, the more they will all enjoy themselves. The progress pupils make in overcoming their difficulties and the way they become more self-assured and optimistic stand them in good stead for success on leaving school. Pupils attend whenever they can and many of those who do not board choose to stay on after school to join in with activities.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are good. Teachers go out of their way to make lessons interesting. They demonstrate high levels of skill in helping pupils to overcome their learning difficulties. Teachers have a good understanding of their subjects and the demands of a wide range of examination courses. Because pupils are so well behaved, learning is rarely interrupted and lessons flow at a good pace. Very occasionally, the pace runs ahead of some pupils, not giving them quite long enough to contribute fully. Older pupils in particular are encouraged to work with as much independence as possible; they are keen to do so and show considerable self-motivation. Planning rarely shows how work is varied for individuals, but small classes mean that pupils get a lot of individual attention and that teachers can build up a good understanding of the progress that each pupil is making. The school no longer has teaching assistants, preferring instead to ensure that all pupils are taught at all times by qualified teachers. Good use is made of homework to help extend and consolidate pupils' learning beyond the classroom.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum is good. It is exceptionally well enriched through a huge range of activities and visits, which contribute enormously to pupils' enjoyment of school and considerably extend the range of opportunities for learning and personal development. Many older pupils, for instance, were leaving for Budapest on the day of the inspection as a part of their art and photography studies. The curriculum meets requirements, but does not include opportunities for pupils to learn a foreign language. The correct procedures have been followed to register this. The time freed up by this is used wisely to give pupils extra help with their literacy and numeracy. There are good opportunities for pupils to gain qualifications to give them a head start on leaving school. GCSE courses are available in all subjects of the curriculum. Entry Level accreditation is offered to pupils with the greatest degree of learning difficulty. The development of the sixth form has allowed pupils to continue their studies beyond the age of 16. At this

stage in its development, the curriculum is unlikely to appeal to pupils who want to learn more about vocational skills in preparation for finding manual jobs on leaving school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The care, guidance and support offered to pupils is outstanding in every respect. Staff are hugely committed to making pupils' lives as happy, safe and fulfilling as possible. Great care is taken to check the suitability of adults for working with young people and procedures to ensure the protection of pupils are rigorously observed. Potential risk in different activities is carefully assessed. This is done as a means of opening up the range of activities pupils can engage in rather than reducing it and removing any sense of adventure.

The school is very successful in involving pupils and their parents in discussions about individual progress. Nearly all parents are very happy with the information they receive about their children's progress. A particularly important aspect of the school's care, support and guidance for pupils is its willingness to embrace any system or method that may prove effective in tracking academic progress and helping individuals to make progress. It is truly eclectic; recognising that what works well for one pupil may not for another.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership, management and governance are good. Staff love working here, pupils thoroughly enjoy attending and parents are overflowing with praise and gratitude. The leadership team is well established and has a long record of continual improvement. A new headteacher has been appointed well in advance of the retirement of the current head, who has provided many years of inspired leadership. This early appointment prudently allows for thorough induction of the new post holder and helps to ensure that the school maintains a good capacity to keep improving through this time of change. Subject leaders play a big part in developing the courses they are responsible for and evaluating their effectiveness. The effectiveness of formal observation of teaching is lessened by being too general, rather than focussing on how effectively investment, training or whole school initiatives have contributed to raising standards. By taking on responsibility for at least one subject each, governors are increasingly involved in monitoring and evaluating the school's effectiveness. They add this role to their dedicated support of the school and their invaluable part in securing the school's future.

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	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 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	2

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	2	3

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	3
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	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	1	2
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	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

12 November 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Nunnykirk Centre for Dyslexia, Northumberland NE61 4PB

What a wonderful time I had on my visit to your lovely school. I especially enjoyed my evening meal with you and the opportunity it gave me to talk to some of you about your views of the school.

I hope those of you who were setting off for Budapest on the morning of my visit had a great trip and I was sorry to miss those of you who were away at the swimming baths all morning. I saw enough, however, to convince me that Nunnykirk is a really good school and that you are happy there.

I only saw a few lessons, but what I saw proved to me that you are well taught. This results in you making good progress in your studies and helps you to get a lot of good qualifications before you leave. The new sixth form is coming on well; you are obviously getting a lot out of your photography and art courses, and I'm hoping that some new courses are going to be added to your timetables to help you to learn more vocational skills. A few of you told me you would like to be mechanics when you leave and someone else said they would like to be a plasterer. It would be good if you could learn more about these opportunities at school.

Your behaviour during my visit was excellent and I'm sure that this is nearly always the case. The lovely, settled atmosphere of the school must help you to study hard and enjoy yourselves.

The school is well run and staff have good ideas about how to keep making it better. It is important, though, that they link these closely to the quality of teaching. Nunnykirk is the sort of school that etches itself on to a visitor's mind – for all the right reasons. I for one will never forget it.

Good luck for the future!

Alastair Younger

Lead inspector