

Mulberry Bush School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123330
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	314561
Inspection date	6 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Sheila Nolan

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Non-maintained special
Age range of pupils	5-12
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	29
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Dr Gina Alexander
Headteacher	Mr Andy Lole
Date of previous school inspection	2 November 2004
School address	Abingdon Road Standlake Witney OX29 7RW
Telephone number	01865 300202
Fax number	01865 300084

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector. The inspector evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues:

- How well the school's leadership has sustained good practice since the last inspection.
- How well pupils achieve in literacy and numeracy.
- How effectively the school promotes the pupils' personal development.

Evidence was gathered from the school's self-evaluation (SEF), by observing lessons, scrutinising the school's records of pupils' standards and achievement and other documentation, and by discussions with students and staff. Parents' responses to questionnaires also informed judgements. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in the SEF, were other than justified. These have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Mulberry Bush School provides education for both day and residential pupils with a wide range of severe emotional, behavioural and social difficulties. Pupils are drawn from across the country, spending on average a three-year period at the school. Currently, there are no day pupils or pupils in the Foundation Stage. There are many more boys than girls on roll, and all have a statement of special educational need. Most are of white British heritage with a very few pupils from mixed black or Caribbean backgrounds. Pupils' attainment on entry to the school is well below average because of previously disrupted schooling. The school is supported and managed by a charitable trust and is accountable to the Trustees. The headteacher reports to the Director of Mulberry Bush, who is responsible for both care and education on the site.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Mulberry Bush is an exceptionally effective school that provides an outstanding quality of education and care for its vulnerable pupils. It very successfully achieves its aim of 'returning children to a stable home base and local school' through its multi-disciplinary approach to 'learning to live and living to learn.' Parents greatly appreciate the school's work. One commented that 'The school and staff are fantastic - supportive, caring and patient in helping our son.'

The school provides high quality care, guidance and support for its pupils through a carefully integrated approach to education and therapeutic programmes. Residential care, psychotherapy, family support and education are very well co-ordinated to provide personalised programmes that ensure the best for each pupil. Mulberry Bush's greatest success is that, usually within a three-year period, pupils manage the transition to family life and schools local to their homes. Excellent boarding provision contributes much to this success, as does pupils' regular contact with their home bases. Because of the very close links between school and the boarding houses, pupils move seamlessly between provisions.

Mulberry Bush lays great store in maintaining a safe and secure environment where pupils can learn to trust adults and each other. As a result, pupils make great strides in their personal development so that it is good by the time they leave. Pupils' satisfactory behaviour and understanding of how to keep safe represent immense improvements from their starting points. Pupils are particularly proud of the 'blue certificate' awarded for successfully keeping themselves safe in both conversations and activities. Their outstanding progress, in working co-operatively with each other and in communicating courteously with both their peers and adults, is evident in the smooth running school council, in the daily household meetings and in the class circle times. Pupils have access at all times to an independent visitor, so that they can voice any concerns. They report that they feel settled in the school and in the boarding houses and confident to take the first-steps to 'making friends,' a real milestone in their lives.

Not only do pupils attend school very well and increasingly adapt their behaviour successfully to the high expectations of the classroom and the households, they also develop positive attitudes to learning. As a result, many participate actively in the wide-ranging after-school clubs and outward-bound activities. Musical activities are clear favourites, both for individuals and groups. Staff and pupils work together in the weekly 'choosing afternoon' when they decide on which exercise opportunity most appeals. Before leaving Mulberry, many attend some mainstream school activities and take an active part in local clubs and cubs. Because of their carefully managed diet plans, pupils know about healthy eating and the importance of avoiding alcohol and drug abuse. Within the Mulberry community, many pupils come to understand the importance of helping others. Pupils run parallel 'anti-bullying' panels to those of the staff, for example. They also value particularly the 'sharing assembly' involving the whole community. Older pupils have taken the initiative to revitalise the library and make it user-friendly for all. They make positive contributions to the wider community through such events as the 'singing together' project to produce an opera. Other pupils are involved in first aid projects at the local hospital.

Pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural and social development is good. From very low starting points, pupils make excellent progress in respecting each other and in learning to value different views and experiences. One pupil commented how proud he was of a fellow pupil who writes stories

for younger ones, for example. They are interested to discover traditions other than their own and join in celebrations of other cultures. They know clearly what is expected of them, even when they find it difficult to conform at all times. Pupils are involved in a wide range of activities to prepare them for the next stage of education. Many manage their pocket money and learn to spend wisely on shopping trips. Above all, they learn to co-operate with others in the smooth running of projects such as the Christmas sale, in aid of animal charities, and 'World Reading Day'. All pupils make at least good progress in basic skills and some gain as much as five years in terms of reading age. Others are proudly managing the significant budget for new play equipment.

Pupils of all backgrounds learn exceptionally well at Mulberry Bush, given their well below average starting points. Many close gaps in their learning very rapidly because of their experience of the stable school and boarding environments and the calm ethos for learning. Standards are close to the age-expected levels for many when they re-integrate into mainstream schools. Pupils make particularly fast progress towards their behavioural and social targets and this has a positive impact on their performance in literacy and numeracy. The school has recognised, however, that pupils achieve less well in open-ended tasks such as those involved in scientific enquiry. This mainly arises from pupils' deep-felt need to 'get things right.' Pupils understand their personal targets and these underpin their progress in learning. Excellent teaching and purposeful individualised support allow pupils to learn successfully and grow confident in their academic tasks. The management of pupils' behaviour is exemplary, as is teachers' pursuit of interesting tasks to capture the pupils' attention. Classrooms are lively and colourful with excellent celebratory and thought-provoking displays. Whole-school arrangements for pupils' academic guidance are also very effective. This information, coupled with that from individual treatment plans, is used carefully to inform lessons.

Mulberry Bush has sustained and improved its good practice noted at the last inspection. This owes much to the inspirational leadership of the headteacher, the committed staff and the vigilance and expertise of the Trustees and the Director. Outstanding leadership and management have ensured that each staff member strives to do the best for the pupils. Each individual is valued and resources targeted to meet their behavioural, social and emotional needs, as well as their learning needs. A major strength of the school is the themed curriculum with its carefully planned stages so that, whenever pupils join Mulberry Bush, they are integrated quickly into the school community. The many out-of-hours activities not only engage the pupils well but also continue learning within the households. The school has excellent links with many agencies to find the best support for the children and, where possible, their families. Partnerships with the local authority schools are also excellent. This allows for the gradual re-integration of pupils into their local schools and is set to provide supportive intervention for vulnerable pupils in their home schools.

Trustees take their responsibilities seriously and play a full part in the school's development. Under the guidance of a very able chair, the school is challenged robustly to be ever better. Trustees make regular, unannounced fact-finding forays with a clearly defined focus for each visit. Self-evaluation is strong and generally accurate.

Effectiveness of boarding provision

Grade: 1

Boarding provision at Mulberry Bush is excellent. Accommodation is bright, airy and cheerful and very well maintained. . The most recent inspection of boarding provision in September 2007 indicates that all aspects are above the national minimum standards for this provision

and almost all are outstanding. Pupils are safe, happy and well supervised, both indoors and out, with play spaces carefully managed. The very good teamwork between senior school and care staff managers ensures boarders' needs are met well in either setting. All recommendations from the recent inspection are being dealt with effectively, including a review of pupils' access to the telephone and the recording of sanctions.

What the school should do to improve further

- Accelerate plans to provide more open-ended activities for pupils across the curriculum.

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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?	1
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 boarding provision	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	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?	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	3
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	1
The behaviour of learners	3
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?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
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?	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
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
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

18 March 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Mulberry Bush School, Witney, OX29 7RW

Thank you for welcoming me to Mulberry Bush and for sharing not only your ideas and opinions, but also your lessons, cheerful households and your plans for World Reading Day. Thank you, particularly, to the school council that so ably shared their activities with me. I was especially impressed by the well-kept records and by the management of the finances for the new playground equipment.

You are rightly proud of Mulberry Bush. You all think that it is a 'nice place to be' and I agree with you. It is a really excellent school. Your exceptional headteacher, staff and Trustees want the best for you and are determined that you make as much progress as you can in lessons and in your personal development. Because you attend very regularly and mostly enjoy your work, the vast majority of you make fast progress, particularly in reading and writing. Indeed, one of you shared with me the books you have written and illustrated for younger pupils.

All members of staff know everyone individually and look after you very well. You also help to look after others, particularly those younger than yourselves. You know that there is always someone to help you if you are distressed. You try to eat healthily and certainly get plenty of exercise in your excellent sports hall and large gardens. You are confident to express your views, but at the same time ready to listen to others. You understand the importance of helping those outside your community and are ready to support good causes, such as animal welfare.

When thinking about how it could be even better, your school is very clear that it would like to involve you in many more opportunities for problem solving, estimating and comparing your original ideas with findings from investigations.

I am sure you will continue to do your level best to cooperate with your teachers and household staff.

I wish you a very happy future at Mulberry Bush and every success when you leave.

Sheila Nolan

Lead Inspector