

Northern House School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123336
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	314564
Inspection date	23 September 2008
Reporting inspector	Anne Duffy HMI

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	5–13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	60
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Lady Julia Berkeley
Headteacher	Mrs Gillian Carey
Date of previous school inspection	12 July 2005
School address	South Parade Summertown Oxford OX2 7JN
Telephone number	01865 557004
Fax number	01865 511210

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors. The inspector evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: achievement and standards; the range and suitability of the curriculum; the impact of leadership and management on improving elements of provision and outcomes for pupils.

Evidence was gathered from: the school's self-evaluation form and other review documents; nationally published assessment data and the school's own assessment records; observation of the school at work in lessons and at break times; discussions with staff, pupils and the chair of the governing body; the parents' questionnaires. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail. However, the inspector found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its most recent self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Northern House School is a special school for pupils currently aged between five and thirteen years which draws its population from across Oxfordshire. In response to local authority strategy, the numbers in Years 7 and 8 have decreased over the past two years with the intention that the school will in the future cater mainly for primary- aged pupils. All pupils have a statement of special educational needs relating to behaviour, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) with a significant number having additional educational needs. Many of these have had negative experiences prior to starting at the school, which they may do at different times throughout the school year. Most pupils are from White British backgrounds. Almost half have free school meals.

The last inspection took place in 2005 when the school was judged to be outstanding, offering excellent value for money. Since then there have been a number of staff changes including amongst the senior leadership team. The previous deputy headteacher is now the headteacher. The school holds a number of awards, including the Inclusion Quality Mark, the Healthy Schools Award and the Eco-Schools Silver Award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Northern House School is outstanding. It makes a significant contribution to improving the educational experience and aspirations of its pupils, many of whom enter with negative views of their capabilities. As one parent wrote, 'Northern House School has restored our son's self-esteem. Without Northern House School it would not have been possible for him to have an education.' The growing numbers of pupils who successfully re-integrate into mainstream schools reflect the school's description of itself as a 'swing door' facility for learners.

All pupils make at least good progress and many make exceptional progress, often from very low starting points. Processes for assessment, tracking, and monitoring of progress are exemplary and ensure that both individual and cohort progress is analysed and gaps identified. As a result, well-targeted and effective intervention is put in place. Although standards are variable, a small proportion reach, and some exceed, national expectations. This is most notable amongst the group who have been at the school since Year 1 or 2, supporting the school's view that early intervention makes a significant difference to educational outcomes. The school makes very good use of available information to measure its success at both a national and local level so that it has a very clear idea of the impact of its provision upon standards and achievement.

The introduction of a holistic assessment, which incorporates all elements of Every Child Matters, ensures that no aspect of a child's learning or development is neglected. Thorough pre-entry assessment considers both risk and resilience and this is built upon to create a comprehensive picture of pupils as they move through the school.

Since the last inspection the school has worked hard to address the relative shortfall in writing standards compared to other skills. Whilst it acknowledges that writing can present emotional as well as learning barriers to its population, recent initiatives such as 'writing week' have been effective in addressing this with very positive results.

The outstanding curriculum is broad, balanced and dynamic. Clear expectations of curriculum co-ordinators are well understood by them and well executed in practice. As a result basic skills, as well as broader aspects of the behaviour-focused curriculum, are addressed well. The curriculum is well matched to the needs of learners, including those for whom an element of the early years foundation stage framework is appropriate. Recent developments, such as the social skills groups and the mental health project, have been carefully and responsively evaluated. Enrichment activities are well planned and delivered and contribute greatly to pupils' new found enjoyment of school.

Celebration of success is evident throughout. Imaginatively displayed art and pupils' work, opportunities for participation in music and drama, and well-structured lunch times all raise pupils' aspirations about what they can do and achieve. Pupils contribute well to their own and the wider community, demonstrating emerging skills which will help them in later life. Despite some constraints imposed by the site, pupils move safely between buildings due to constant staff vigilance. Careful risk assessment supports pupils' safety while plans to limit site access are implemented.

Appropriate plans are in place to build upon existing strengths to develop a thematic curriculum, which is being well trialled with staff and pupils. Community-based activities and the school's integration project strongly promote community cohesion and establish the school firmly within the local authority's strategy for meeting the needs of primary-aged pupils with BESD.

The leadership and management of the school are outstanding. The charismatic and determined headteacher has formed a close-knit senior leadership team, clearly held accountable by the recently reconfigured governing body. Staff are buoyant and feel extremely well supported by each other and their managers. Resources are well deployed. In partnership with the local authority, and through various other forms of collaboration, much fine work exists to boost links with mainstream schools and support services, thereby smoothing transfer and integration for pupils where appropriate. Links with parents and carers are well developed and the school is aware of the need to build upon these as it moves into its next phase of development.

Self-evaluation and constant reflection drive continuing improvement well. Challenging targets are set and all new initiatives are well planned, carefully evaluated, and effectively implemented. Nevertheless, the school is not complacent and has appropriately identified the need to streamline its processes for self-evaluation and development so that unnecessary stages are removed whilst core values remain clear. Although the school had not been using the descriptors contained within the inspection framework to evaluate its performance, during the course of the inspection it was able to cross-reference its judgements, demonstrating that it knows itself extremely well. In view of this, its innovative work in the area of BESD, and the rising trend in educational outcomes, the school demonstrates that it has excellent capacity for improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Sharpen processes for school self-evaluation.

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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 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/or disabilities make progress	1

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are 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	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	1
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	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of 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

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 eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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

Annex B

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

06 October 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Northern House School, Oxford, OX2 7JN

Thank you very much for welcoming me to your school. I really enjoyed my visit, particularly the chance to meet and talk to so many of you. I am writing this letter to tell you what I found.

I think your school is outstanding. Lots of you told me that you enjoy school and I could see how well it helps you to improve your behaviour and your learning. I was pleased to see so much of your work on display and enjoyed looking at what you were doing in class. You are right to be proud of the excellent progress you are making. There is a very good range of interesting things for you to do both in and out of school.

Your headteacher leads the school very well indeed and all the staff work well together. I have asked them to be very clear about what the school does best and what needs improving, so that they can all help to make your school even better.

I hope that you will all try your best and do well in the future.

Yours sincerely

Anne Duffy

Her Majesty's Inspector