

The Pioneer School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	134100
Local Authority	ESSEX LA
Inspection number	316238
Inspection dates	6–7 February 2008
Reporting inspector	Judith Charlesworth

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	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	104
6th form	18
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Pamela Stanley
Headteacher	Mr Steve Horsted
Date of previous school inspection	13 June 2005
School address	Church Road Basildon Essex SS14 2EX
Telephone number	01268 522077
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The Pioneer school caters for pupils with moderate to severe and complex needs. It was formed from an amalgamation of two special schools in 2003. It still operates on two sites but is due to relocate to newly-built single premises next term. The school is working with Essex local authority to develop as a 'New Model Special School' (NMSS) which provides an integrated multi-agency service for the pupils and their families. The complexity of pupils' needs is greater in the Foundation and primary phases due to changes in admissions to the school, and numbers of pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) are decreasing. Currently, 33% of the pupils have MLD, 45% have severe learning difficulties (SLD), 12% have profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), and 10% have autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). The great majority of pupils are White British and come from Basildon, some parts of which are considered areas of relative socio-economic disadvantage.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Pioneer is a good school that has improved significantly since its last inspection. At that time, it was still rationalising its provision following reformation as a single school, and it was also in the early stages of working towards becoming a NMSS.

A number of the internal structures of the school, for example lines of management and the use of a special local authority supported publication of key skills to underpin planning for pupils' progress, were laid down by the NMSS guidance. However, the school's managers felt that they needed additional support to turn this into effective practice. The school employed an external company specialising in school development and improvement. This has been very effective and has brought about positive change and rapid progress towards becoming an NMSS. The move into new premises next term will support this further. Since the last inspection, there have been improvements in leadership and management, which is now good and effectively spread throughout the school. Improved teaching, learning, achievement, curriculum and care support and guidance, also means these areas are now good.

The school supports pupils' educational needs well. Although their academic standards are low, records show that they achieve well. The curriculum is good for each age group. Curriculum plans have a standardised format which supports effective lesson planning, but with different, yet appropriate content for each department. For example, much of the curriculum for the oldest pupils is community-based, whereas that for the youngest pupils is focused on developing means of communication. A very rigorous system of monitoring and support has improved the quality of teaching, learning and pupils' achievement. Two systems for planning for, and assessing, pupils' progress have been implemented. One relates to the development of pupils' key skills, as required by NMSS, and the other relates to achievement in curriculum subjects and areas of learning. However, the links between the two are not sufficiently clear, and planning for progress in curriculum subjects is not a feature in enough lesson planning.

The support, care and guidance for pupils are good. A new, very effective planning system brings together parents, children and professionals to plan each pupil's annual targets and the support required. These are written in a 'unified plan'. Parents are very pleased with this process. Pupils are given good support and advice for their next steps after leaving school, and adequate systems are in place to safeguard their health, welfare and safety. Nevertheless, pupils' personal development and well-being is satisfactory overall. Behaviour is good, and pupils are prepared well for life after school. Their attendance is satisfactory and they enjoy school. However, the school's focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning has taken precedence over making sure that pupils' personal development is sufficiently promoted. For instance, consideration of the national 'Every Child Matters' agenda features very little in the school's documentation; pupils do not contribute sufficiently to their own school community, and assemblies do not provide systematic support for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The managers are aware that concentration on large scale development has reduced their focus on the everyday detail in the running of the school. Nevertheless, the strategic vision and drive for the school's continued development is outstanding, and its capacity for further improvement is good.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Although the school's policies and practices also underpin this department, the sixth form works autonomously to give the students a more adult environment. This is effective. The curriculum is good and combines a range of interesting activities, such as horticulture, with subjects to support improvements in students' basic skills, such as literacy. The curriculum and good care, support and guidance promote the students' personal development effectively. Teaching is good, and students achieve well. The Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network and the Duke of Edinburgh Award accredit their achievements, for example. The students spend much of their time learning in real life situations in the community, which prepares them well for adulthood and the next step in their lives.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

The children in the Foundation Stage have wide-ranging needs. These are all met effectively by a stimulating, highly structured environment in which teaching, the curriculum, care and support are good, and often outstanding. Relationships between staff and children, and with parents, are very strong. This helps the staff understand individuals' needs and plan very carefully for their progress. The children often show challenging behaviour when they first attend. The staff help them learn to communicate, understand the routines of the day and enjoy learning. As a result, the children achieve well, and progress for some is outstanding.

What the school should do to improve further

- Plan more effectively for pupils' personal development and well-being throughout the curriculum and everyday work.
- Improve the links between planning for the development of key skills and for progress in curriculum subjects.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Attainment on entry is low. Pupils make good progress although, understandably, the standards they attain remain well below average. Nevertheless, most pupils gain accreditation in a range of subjects at Entry Level or in other nationally recognised courses by the time they leave. The school has two main means of judging achievement. The first is by the assessment of pupils' progress towards the targets set on their individual education plans. These are based on the key skills schedule used by NMSS schools. Although there are some parallels, for example in communication and numeracy skills, the key skill areas do not relate directly to the areas of learning and subjects of the National Curriculum. Individual records show that pupils make good progress towards their key skills targets. The second means is by assessing pupils' performance against national benchmarks related to National Curriculum levels and P-levels. Pupils are assessed twice a term. Data is sent to a national database and the school's results in comparison to nationwide data are fed back. The first feedback showed variable progress. Girls and pupils with SLD, PMLD and ASD made better progress than average, whereas pupils with MLD progressed less well than expected. The school acknowledges that the data entries for this first run were not accurate and so gave a negative picture. Nevertheless, it implemented

stringent measures to improve pupils' progress, with good results. Achievement has improved overall, and the achievement of all groups of pupils is now good.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Pupils' behaviour is good and they enjoy school. Their relationships with one another are generally positive, although there is a small amount of bullying. Nevertheless, most parents say that their children feel safe in school. Pupils know who to turn to if in distress, and the school acts appropriately in such instances. Attendance is satisfactory but is adversely affected by the ill health of some pupils and the persistently poor attendance of a very small number. The pupils' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. This aspect of pupils' development is not sufficiently well considered in the school's planning and everyday work. For example, pupils gain the key skills they need to be well prepared for their future lives, and make a good contribution to the wider community by working on initiatives such as the Gunpowder Park project. However, they have insufficient opportunity to contribute to their own community, such as through a school council, by the systematic collection of their views, or by organised support for one another. The pupils respond well to opportunities to take physical exercise, but do not always choose other healthy options. Religious education supports spiritual development effectively, but this is not reinforced by sufficient opportunity for reflection on wider issues at other times.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching supports learning effectively. Parents and carers are well involved by various means, including annual planning meetings, homework and curriculum newsletters. Most teachers have good subject knowledge, use resources well, make good use of support staff and challenge pupils with motivating tasks and a lively approach. However, a small amount of teaching does not show enough of these positive attributes. For example, not all staff have the skills to work effectively with lower attaining pupils, particularly in relation to ensuring their understanding and promoting communication. This tends to show most when staff fill in for one another. The quality of lesson planning is variable. Some is extremely detailed and takes very good account of individual education plan targets and the development of their subject skills. In a few instances, planning is much broader so that learning is not at the centre of the activities. Lessons are less effective when this occurs. Assessment is usually rigorous. Pupils' progress against their targets is continually assessed, and in the best lessons, pupils know their targets and assess how well they have learned for themselves. However, there are insufficient links between targets set for the development of key skills and the assessment of progress in subjects and areas of learning, particularly for the lower attaining pupils.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum helps pupils enjoy learning. It is planned effectively to meet the needs and requirements of all age groups, and the separate sensory curriculum for pupils with PMLD meets their needs well. Careful planning in subjects and areas of learning forms a good basis for lesson planning. In all departments, there is an appropriate emphasis on developing pupils' basic skills in communication, literacy and numeracy. However, provision for and the use of information and communication technology is not yet good enough. Curriculum enrichment and the promotion of pupils' personal development and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are satisfactory. The curriculum for pupils over 14 years has a good focus on vocational and work related learning, and the school has effective links with external agencies to support this aspect of its work. The older pupils' achievements are suitably accredited. The curriculum prepares pupils well for life after school, and the great majority move on to college courses at the ages of 16 or 19.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The guidance and support offered in relation to pupils' academic progress is good. In keeping with NMSS guidance, the school has recently implemented an outstanding, new, annual review system that is documented in a 'unified plan'. This plan is the basis of pupils' personalised provision. Parents' and pupils' views are central to the process, and the multi-disciplinary professional 'team around the child' use them as the basis for formulating pupils' individual education plan targets in key skill areas. Newly appointed key workers support this process very effectively, working across home, school and community settings to ensure that the unified plan is implemented. Parents feel they are now much better involved in planning for their children's provision, but a few are disappointed at the limited external therapy support. Pupils' progress against their key skill targets is meticulously recorded. However, technological difficulties have delayed the implementation of an electronic system to track this efficiently. Pupils' achievement in curriculum subjects is also regularly assessed and guides planning appropriately. In conjunction with external professionals, the school gives pupils and parents good information, advice and guidance for their next steps after leaving school. Pupils are well cared for and properly safeguarded. However, some of the school's policies are in need of review to bring them up to date. The school is currently working towards the Healthy Schools award but promotion of pupils' personal development and well-being throughout its everyday work is currently insufficiently systematic.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The leaders and managers are taking the school forward rapidly in an innovative direction that is sharply focused on assuring high quality provision. This aspect of the school's work is outstanding. A new management structure and an exceptionally rigorous system of monitoring,

analysis and feedback have raised standards very effectively, and addressed key weaknesses identified in the previous inspection. A few systems, for example those to track pupils' progress have been developed and partially implemented, but are not yet fully in place. Consequently, the use of challenging targets to raise standards is satisfactory. Leadership and management are dispersed very well through the school. Together with the headteacher and deputy headteacher, the management and development teams advise, monitor and work to improve the performance of staff and pupils. The system ensures all staff are fully involved in self-evaluation and contribute effectively to school improvement. However, the current fast rate of development and the inevitable focus on the new building and the school's move have meant that a few aspects of the school's work, such as the effectiveness of performance targets set for staff and parents' views, have not been fully followed up.

The governing body is effective and discharges its duties well. The school and governing body are mutually supportive, and governors are properly involved in steering its strategic direction. The governing body carefully considers the use of financial resources before agreeing expenditure, for instance on employing a coach to support improvements in teaching. The school works well with other agencies and individuals to promote integrated care, therapy and learning, as shown by the success of the unified plan.

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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 effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	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?	3	3
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	
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?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

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	1	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
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	2	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

11 February 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of The Pioneer School, Basildon, SS14 2NQ

Thank you for making us so welcome last week, and for letting my colleague, Peter Hare, and me come into your lessons and other activities. I know that Mr Hare particularly enjoyed the discussions he had with some of you. We came to the school to see how it was working and how well you were all doing, and we were very pleased with what we found. We think that The Pioneer is a good school. It has improved a lot in the last three years.

You are now making better progress, because the staff have been working very hard to improve teaching and your learning. There are good systems to plan for and record your progress, and staff make sure that your individual needs are met. The 'unified plans' resulting from the 'joined up planning meetings' that you attend involve your parents and carers very well in your education and care. They are pleased with this new development. The staff give you an interesting range of things to do. We like the way that the curriculum changes as you move through the departments of the school, to help you grow up and become prepared for your future lives as adults.

We have asked the headteacher to improve lesson planning. We would like your targets for learning to include those taken from your unified plans, and also some to develop your subject skills. We have also said that the school should work to improve your personal development. My colleague and I think that you should know more about staying safe and healthy, and about contributing to your school community. We would also like you to have more opportunity to explore your own and others' beliefs and feelings.

We hope that the move to your new school building goes well, and that you enjoy your lovely new facilities.

Yours sincerely

Judith Charlesworth

Lead inspector