

Red Balloon Learner Centre

Independent Special School

Inspection report

DCSF Registration Number	873/6024
Unique Reference Number	131330
Inspection number	320762
Inspection dates	11–12 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Joan Hewitt

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002 (as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005).

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Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE
T 08456 404040

www.ofsted.gov.uk



Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, in order to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

The Red Balloon Learners' Centre is a day special school for up to 15 students aged between 10–17 who are recovering from bullying or having been ostracised in their mainstream school. There are 15 students on roll; six pupils have statements of special educational need. Some are placed by local authorities; two authorities currently fund places for students. The centre first opened in 1996 and it is situated in the centre of Cambridge. The centre is one of three such provisions nationally. The centre was registered in September 1997 and this is its first full inspection.

Evaluation of the school

Overall, the quality of education is good and the pastoral care of students is outstanding. This results in the students developing good personal and social qualities. Students feel safe and have access to a negotiated curriculum that caters for their individual needs. The centre provides a high level of staffing such that students can receive individual tuition to aid their personal development and recovery. Students also make good academic progress because of the good teaching they receive. The school meets the majority of the independent schools regulations.

Quality of education

The curriculum is good. It is designed to nurture academic, personal and social development. Students follow a programme, which teachers negotiate with them, that meets their academic individual needs and particular interests. For example, teachers take students to the local leisure centre to engage students who have expressed an interest in swimming. All pupils work on improving their reading, writing, listening, speaking and numeracy skills. Teachers are responsive to pupils' interests and adapt their lessons to explore avenues that interest them, usually very effectively. However, there are occasions when this results in superficial learning opportunities. The range of accredited courses available includes GCSE and Entry-level certification in a number of subjects. There are very good links with a number of local schools and colleges which enable the centre to prepare pupils well for their re-integration to mainstream education, employment or training.

Teaching and assessment are good and as a result, students make good progress. Teachers know their students very well and plan for their individual needs. Many lessons involve one to one tuition, which result in work that the teacher has closely matched to students' interests and abilities. In the best lessons, students have the

opportunity to give extended answers and solve problems. In less effective lessons, teachers tend to dominate the dialogue and the level of challenge is not always appropriate. The centre is aware that students need more opportunities to evaluate their own work so that they can identify the next steps they should take to improve their learning. Teachers engage students' interest because of their very good subject knowledge; however, the opportunity to use a variety of activities is sometimes missed. Teachers mark work regularly and often make helpful comments to advise students of how they can improve their work. Senior staff are aware that this practice needs to be used more consistently.

Teachers record students' progress in note form at the end of each lesson. Some notes are detailed and helpful in charting both academic and personal progress; however not all records are of this standard. The headteacher and proprietors acknowledge that the central gathering of attainment and achievement data will further enhance the centre's work in facilitating students' successful transition to mainstream education, employment or training.

Students have very good relationships with their teachers and the one to one tuition and support helps to keep them engaged and focused on their work. When students become distressed and unable to continue in their learning, staff are able to respond capably to their needs. In keeping with its stated aims, the centre does not set homework but provides students with the opportunity to do 'own work'. This allows students to make use of the centre's resources to consolidate their learning.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is good. The social and moral aspects are particularly strong. Students speak positively about the centre and enjoy the community life at Red Balloon. They attribute a feeling of safety in the school to the care and swift responses they get from the staff. There are opportunities for spiritual reflection in many lessons and activities. The centre is successful in raising students' self-esteem from extremely low starting points. Teachers achieve this through personal feedback and the opportunities taken to develop skills in areas where students have a particular aptitude. For example, students who have a musical skill are provided with specialist tuition which develops their abilities to the point they have the confidence to perform publicly. Attendance is low for some students; however, this represents a good improvement where previously they had not attended school for some considerable time. Senior staff take great care in nurturing attendance and everything possible is done to help students attend the centre regularly. Behaviour is good overall and when there are incidents of poor behaviour staff take prompt action. This helps students to feel secure and free from intimidation. The atmosphere in the centre is calm and welcoming.

Students develop good personal qualities, which support their ability to make successful transitions to mainstream education, employment or training. The opportunities to contribute to the community life of the centre are good. Students and staff work, eat and relax together. Teachers use every opportunity to develop students' social skills and personal qualities; this is particularly important as some students arrive at the centre with severe difficulties in socialising. Teachers work effectively with students during their time at the centre to enable them to express their feelings in acceptable ways. Students learn strategies to deal effectively with issues when things go wrong and this places them in a strong position to be successful when they make the transition into mainstream education, employment or training. The centre maintains close contact with students as they transfer and it is developing strategies to evaluate how successfully students maintain their recovery from severe bullying.

Students have respect for other cultures. The centre has identified the need to include more opportunities for students to learn about other countries, faiths and cultural traditions to support them as they take their place in a multi-cultural society. Students have a good understanding of institutions and the law so that they can be informed citizens. The centre's emphasis on developing students' reading, writing and numeracy prepares them well for their next steps in education, employment or training.

Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The provision to ensure the welfare, health and safety of students is good. Teachers supervise students very well around the centre and procedures for outside visits include appropriate risk assessments. Child protection procedures are robust and the staff record serious incidents of poor or inappropriate behaviour. Arrangements for health and safety, fire safety, risk assessments and first aid meet requirements. These arrangements are reviewed regularly on an informal basis but the formal reviewing of written policies is less secure. Teachers deal with any incidents of bullying quickly and this helps students to regain their trust in authority. The centre takes every opportunity to help students adopt good and considerate behaviour. There were three fixed term exclusions in the last twelve months.

Regular sport and close attention to food menus and house routines effectively contribute to students' healthy lifestyles. The centre offers therapy to all students to aid their speedy recovery and, impressively, it offers family therapy. All students participate in circle time, which gives them the opportunity to address any issues that have arisen and further supports them in finding appropriate ways to share their feelings and seek constructive solutions.

Teachers have an on-going dialogue and close relationships with parents who speak highly of the centre and its work. For example, one parent commented, 'The Red Balloon has been a life saver for us'. The centre also works well in partnership with other outside agencies, which results in good quality support for those in its care.

Although the centre maintains an attendance register accurately, it does not yet comply with all of the requirements in relation to its admissions register. The centre does not yet fulfil its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 2002 in that it has not drawn up an accessibility plan.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

Appropriate arrangements and checks are in place to recruit suitable staff and procedures meet all requirements. The centre maintains a single central record of all required checks on the suitability of staff and volunteers.

School's premises and accommodation

The centre is housed in a former domestic residence. There are five floors with specialist accommodation for science, art and music. In addition, there is a small library and a quiet room for therapy. A new conservatory is being built and a summerhouse will shortly be available for use. There are no paved or grassed areas for recreation; however, the centre is within close proximity to the city's parks, gardens and leisure facilities, which the centre uses frequently. The house is well maintained and furnished. The premises are safe and enable effective learning.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The centre recognises parents as crucial partners in their children's recovery and as such involves them fully. The centre's commitment to supporting parents is outstanding. Parents know they can contact the centre any time during the day. The co-ordinator is available for telephone conversations until ten o'clock at night and if necessary at weekends. The centre runs a parent support workshop, which parents of up to six students currently attend. The school provides all the required information including a helpful student achievement report.

Procedures for handling complaints

The centre has satisfactory procedures in place for handling complaints. The school's complaints policy complies with latest regulations. The school has had no formal complaints in the past year.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended January 2005, with the exception of that listed below.

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety (standard 3) and must:

- Prepare an admissions register in accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations. (paragraph 3(9))

In order to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002 the school should devise a three-year accessibility plan.

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- Provide opportunities for pupils to evaluate their own work and identify the next steps they need to take to improve it.
- Develop systems to gather achievement and academic progress information centrally.
- Develop strategies to evaluate how well students maintain their recovery when they make the transition to mainstream education, employment or training.

School details

Name of school	Red Balloon Learner Centre Cambridge		
DCSF number	873/6024		
Unique reference number	131330		
Type of school	Special; for children who have been bullied		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1996		
Age range of pupils	10-17		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 8	Girls: 7	Total: 15
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 6	Girls: 0	Total: 6
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day pupils)	£12,060-16,668		
Address of school	Herbert House 57 Warkworth Terrace Cambridge Cambridgeshire CB1 1EE		
Telephone number	01223 357714		
Fax number	01223 357714		
Email address	jessica@cambridge.redballoonlearner.org.uk		
Headteacher	Mrs J Lechner		
Proprietor	Dr Carrie Herbert		
Reporting inspector	Joan Hewitt		
Dates of inspection	11-12 March 2008		