

Vernon House School

Inspection report - amended

Unique Reference Number	101581
Local Authority	Brent
Inspection number	323480
Inspection date	9 October 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	5-11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	20
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Ian Van Every
Headteacher	Ms Lucy Addington
Date of previous school inspection	4 October 2005
School address	Drury Way London NW10 0NQ
Telephone number	020 8451 6961
Fax number	020 8830 1352

Age group	5-11
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Amended Report Addendum

This report has been amended following a complaint.

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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:

- the school's effectiveness since the last inspection
- the effectiveness of the school's systems for tracking progress, and the use of the information gained to inform planning for pupils' progress
- the scope and effectiveness of the curriculum.

Evidence was gathered from visits to lessons; discussions with staff, a parent and a representative from the local authority; school documentation, and assessment information. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail.

Description of the school

Vernon House is a small special school catering for boys and girls with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Many have additional difficulties, including learning difficulties, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, mild autistic spectrum disorder and mental health problems. An increasing number are admitted after an assessment period in psychiatric health provision. Some pupils re-integrate into mainstream schools, but most move on to further specialist provision.

Currently, there are 20 pupils on roll, all of whom are boys aged between 8 and 11. Most have a record of poor school attendance and low attainment because of their complex difficulties. About half the pupils come from Brent, and the remainder from other local authorities. The majority of pupils are of Black African or Black Caribbean heritage, which reflects the population of the school's locality. Two pupils are of Irish Traveller heritage, and one fifth are looked after in foster care or by their extended family. The head teacher took up her post in January 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Vernon House provides a satisfactory quality of education, and under the leadership of the new headteacher is improving well.

At its last inspection, the school was judged to be good. Between the last inspection and this, the overall effectiveness of the school decreased sharply because behaviour was not well managed to the extent that the local authority recognised Vernon House as a school causing them concern. Problems with staffing and the budget compounded the situation. As a result the local authority has given considerable support to the school. This has been effective and very well received. Parents are very pleased with the school and the effect it has on their children. Almost all inspection questionnaires contain comments such as: 'my son has made excellent progress'; 'the change in my son is outstanding'; and, 'he has started to see a positive side to school and is making progress in everything.'

Although a number of the staff are very long-standing, effectively, their roles as senior leaders and managers were newly established when the headteacher took up post. Members of the leadership team are learning how to set a clear direction towards the improvement required, and promote high quality education. They are becoming increasingly effective in this but have further to go. A programme of staff training and development has helped sustain improvement, and some new members of staff have brought valuable expertise and experience to the school. Similar changes have taken place in the governing body during the last year. This, too, is developing new, collaborative ways of working. The governing body provides suitable support and challenge to the school. Leadership and management are satisfactory overall.

The school has worked hard to improve pupils' behaviour, so that they are in a better position to learn. A range of systems has been introduced to do this. Staff are trained on how to defuse difficult situations and conduct appropriate restraints, if necessary. The behaviour management policy, 'Going for Gold', emphasises reward for positive behaviour and application in class, and pupils are supported to take responsibility for their own behaviour. These measures are successful. Exclusions are reducing, attendance is good and behaviour is satisfactory. This is an achievement for these pupils.

The care, guidance and support given to pupils is satisfactory overall. Aspects, however, are good. The staff's consideration for pupils' personal development, welfare and well-being is very good. All pupils are equally respected, cherished and treated as individuals whatever their backgrounds and needs. Pupils are well safeguarded by robust practices which comply with legal requirements, and the school effectively promotes their health and safety. It works well with external agencies to protect and support individuals, and to enrich pupils' educational experiences. Pupils work towards challenging targets set to promote their personal development. The weaknesses in guidance, however, relate to a lack of academic guidance informed by clear assessments of individuals' skills, knowledge and understanding. The school conducted diagnostic reading tests for the first time in March, but has not yet repeated them to measure individuals' progress. A good system for tracking pupils' progress has been introduced. However, this is not yet fully in use. Neither system, therefore, has yet provided useful data to underpin planning for progress. Consequently, individual education and behaviour plans do not include sharp educational targets, although generic learning objectives for the class are set at the start of each lesson. The school recognises that improvements in this area are a matter of urgency.

The school focuses closely on supporting pupils' personal development and well-being. This aspect of their development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is good as a result. A relevant, nationally recognised curriculum initiative, the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning, and additional therapies and calming activities such as drama therapy and yoga, have been introduced into the curriculum. Pupils enjoy these and benefit greatly from them. They develop good relationships and learn to be tolerant and understanding of each other. Pupils' self-esteem and confidence improve, and they recognise their own difficulties and learn acceptable strategies for managing them. The pupils become able to take a full part in community activities, which makes a good contribution to their social development and the cohesion of the local community. However, the school has not yet actively considered how to extend this to promote wider community cohesion. The multi-cultural pupil and local community provide a rich, celebrated context in which pupils' cultural development develops well. They generally adopt safe practices, for example, there are very few incidents of racism or bullying. Similarly, pupils usually make healthy choices. They choose healthy foods and drinks, and participate enthusiastically in sports. Observations of playtime show that most pupils enjoy being very active - climbing, running and swinging in the areas provided. They recognise the benefits of the school's work on their emotional and mental health, and enjoy the rewards of their improved personal development.

The curriculum is satisfactory. Its strengths are in the provision for pupils' personal, social, emotional and health education, and in enrichment, including visits, visitors and community links, for example for sports activities. These activities have a positive impact on pupils' emotional development and confidence, and prepare them effectively for the next stage in their education and, ultimately, adulthood. There is a strong, appropriate focus on supporting pupils' core literacy and numeracy skills. Pupils improve steadily in these subjects and learn to apply their skills to other subjects.

The school has just implemented a topic-based approach to teaching and learning in most other subjects. The staff feel, quite rightly, that this will appeal much more to pupils' interests and suit their capabilities better. The first topic 'Meet the Greeks' is now underway and is proving engaging for the pupils. However, the implementation has not been planned thoroughly enough. Insufficient thought has been given to, for example, the place of science, how to record pupils' learning and achievement, and how to ensure that all classes include a suitable balance of subjects in the topic. Provision in information and communication technology is currently inadequate as the school is awaiting the installation of suitable hardware. Curriculum balance is monitored in some, but not all classes. The school recognises that to be successful, the implementation of this curriculum approach needs further work.

The quality of education is satisfactory and pupils make satisfactory progress, although the standards they attain usually remain below expectations for their age due to their complex needs. Some individuals make good academic progress in literacy and numeracy, particularly as their personal development improves and they come to enjoy learning. Teaching is satisfactory. Even though some individual lessons are good or outstanding, their overall impact is limited by the lack of a well-planned curriculum and suitable assessment and planning procedures. Pupils are generally well supported by relevant activities and effective teaching and support in class. However, this depends too much on the informal knowledge of the staff rather than on a strategic plan to help each individual learn, including clearly defined academic targets that pupils know, understand and strive towards.

The school's self-evaluation is now penetrating and realistic, and has set an appropriate agenda for improvement. The pace of development was slower last year, due to the number of existing

problems to address, and the number of new systems and practices to be implemented. These issues are almost all resolved and the school is moving forward well. The leadership team is actively addressing the quality of education. The school has implemented a number of improvements although many of these need to be further developed, embedded and evaluated before they can be fully successful. On the basis of the effectiveness of the head teacher and developing capability of school staff and governors, the improvements implemented and sustained in the last 18 months, and the plans laid for further development, the school's capacity for further improvement is good.

What the school should do to improve further

- Fully implement the new assessment systems and use them to track pupils' attainment systematically; to provide the information needed to plan for individuals' progress; to set pupils clear, challenging academic targets that they know and understand.
- Develop suitable planning for the topic-based curriculum approach, and ensure that learning in the various subjects is both planned for, and assessed.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next Section 5 inspection.

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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?	3
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?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3

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?	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	2
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	2
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	3

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
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**

20 October 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Vernon House School, London, NW10 0NQ

Thank you for making me welcome when I visited your school. I very much enjoyed sitting in on your lessons, and was impressed with the way that you were working and behaving.

I came to the school to see how it is working and how well you are doing. I think the school makes a great difference to your personal development, and I know that your parents and carers think so too. The head teacher and staff are very keen to do their best for you. They help you improve some of your difficulties, and this helps you to be better prepared for learning. They also establish good relationships with your parents and carers.

You clearly enjoy attending school. You attend more regularly than you did previously at other schools, and the behaviour of most of you is good. The curriculum is interesting, and the teaching helps you develop your literacy and numeracy skills. This is important as you will be better prepared for the next step in your educational journey, and for adulthood. The new topic work you are doing is very exciting, and I hope you enjoy this new approach to learning. I like the way that the curriculum is enriched by all sorts of additional activities that take place in the community. The staff work hard to keep you safe and healthy, and prepare you for moving on.

I have asked the staff and governors to improve the work of the school in three main ways. The first is to assess your skills more effectively, and use the information to help you make even better progress. I have also asked them to set you better learning targets, so that you know exactly what you need to do to improve. The new topic work approach needs developing, so that the staff can be sure that you learn and make as much progress as possible in all the subjects of the curriculum.

I wish you all the very best for your futures.

Yours sincerely,

Judith Charlesworth

Lead Inspector