

The Valley School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117669
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326658
Inspection dates	12–13 February 2009
Reporting inspector	Alan Lemon

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	172
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Jackie Joyce
Headteacher	Mr David Harrison
Date of previous school inspection	9 February 2006
School address	Valley Way Stevenage Hertfordshire SG2 9AB
Telephone number	01438 747274
Fax number	01438 747966

Age group	11–16
Inspection dates	12–13 February 2009
Inspection number	326658

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The school provides for students with moderate learning difficulties who live in a wide area of north Hertfordshire including the towns of Royston, Baldock, Letchworth, Hitchin, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City. All of the students have a statement of special educational needs. The majority have learning difficulties in addition to moderate learning difficulties which include autism, Down's Syndrome, Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and sensory impairments. As a result of their learning difficulties, students' attainment on entry is very low compared to age-related expectations. The great majority of students are White British. The small number of minority ethnic students are mostly from Asian or Black ethnic backgrounds. Four students speak English as an additional language. Six students are in the care of their local authority.

The school is part of the South Stevenage Extended Schools Consortium. It has links with local primary, secondary, special schools, further education colleges, training providers and the Stevenage Sports Partnership. The school has Investors in People status, the Football Association Charter Award and Sports Mark.

A reorganisation of the school is under consideration which could involve moving to a new site. There has been a significant turnover of staff in the past two years.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The Valley School is satisfactory. The staff take good care of all the students and promote their well-being, health and safety effectively. Staff have a good awareness of all students' learning difficulties and disabilities, and as a team they are committed to ensuring they are being fully met. Students' personal development and well-being are good. They respond well to the school's active promotion of a healthy lifestyle, particularly through sports. Positive relationships with staff and the friendliness of staff encourages students' good behaviour and good capacity to stay safe. Students keenly contribute by being helpful in school and through their concern to help others.

Parents support the school as they see it as catering well for their children. They know their children enjoy school and believe they are making progress at a pace that suits them. The amount of progress made in lessons, over time and towards individual targets is satisfactory. This is because teaching is satisfactory and its impact on learning is moderate. The pace of learning is often more gentle than it should be. Lesson planning often does not acquire a sharp focus on what students should learn and how this can best be achieved. This is because the knowledge of students' progress is not extensive enough to increase its rate beyond being satisfactory. While the support and guidance for students is good in relation to their pastoral care and personal development, it is satisfactory overall because the support and guidance to help them with their progress in lessons is not as strong.

The school has been engaged in improving how teachers write lesson plans and, as good practice, they all identify learning objectives for their lessons. However, these are sometimes expressed in vague terms because assessment is not regular and rigorous enough. Periodic assessments give teachers a broad picture of progress but not the detail they need to plan students' work and set targets with the precision to raise further the pace of progress. There are as many teachers writing sharply worded objectives as not and as a rule, good objectives well used often lead to good teaching.

By the end of Key Stage 4, when students are leaving school, although standards are low, they have achieved satisfactorily. The large majority achieve one or two GCSEs from English, mathematics and science and nearly all gain Entry Level Certificates in these subjects and several others, especially in information and communication technology (ICT) where students' progress is good.

The curriculum has several good features but is satisfactory because, without the benefit of consistently rigorous assessment to plan work and activities, it has less impact on progress. As a result, the curriculum is broad but is often restricted to following schemes of work that are not adapted significantly to better suit students' learning needs. However, it caters satisfactorily for all of the students' needs. Its enrichment through sports and clubs is a strength. Practical activities such as physical education, design and technology and ICT, because they are well led, contribute much to students' enjoyment. As students reach Key Stage 4, their activities have a pronounced work-related content, supported well with good links with colleges. This ensures they leave school prepared soundly for the future.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The senior leadership team is being expanded and restructured although this is not complete. Roles are not yet firmly established, such as who has overall responsibility for teaching and learning, assessment and the curriculum but in several instances, heads of departments have created good provision in their subjects. Governors

have improved their work with the school since the previous inspection. They have challenged the school's interpretation of the attendance policy, demanding a firmer line with parents who take term time holidays. However, the information for governors on student's progress is limited and this prevents them from questioning students' outcomes.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise the level of lesson planning to ensure a firm link between sharply-focused objectives and effective learning.
- Develop assessment procedures that measure accurately and frequently students' small steps of progress in relation to learning objectives.
- Use effective assessment procedures to identify specific and relevant targets for each student.

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.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Students rate of progress is satisfactory. By the time they leave at the end of Key Stage 4 almost all achieve externally awarded accreditation. Compared with age related expectations, standards are low. Nevertheless, students' achievement is satisfactory. The more able students leave with one or two GCSE A* to G certificates in either English, mathematics or science. In 2008, from a total of 36 students, seven passed in English, 13 in mathematics and eight in science. Almost all students left in 2008 with Entry Level Certificates in English, mathematics, physical education and ICT. The ICT results have been particularly strong in successive years with nearly all Year 11 students gaining the highest grade pass. This good progress reflects the strength of the school's provision for ICT. Science results were not as good as other subjects or compared to those in 2007 because the department is rebuilding following the recent departure of teachers. The overall picture of satisfactory progress arises from the generally satisfactory quality of teaching and learning and in particular a lack of rigorous assessment and sharply focused lesson planning.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students are happy at school because of the good relationships they have with adults and each other. They feel secure and self-confident as a result. Attendance is satisfactory and students enjoy school reasonably well but a lack of more challenging lessons prevents enjoyment being even better. Students benefit from a good many experiences that round their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Assemblies develop students' feelings of well-being by celebrating their success and encouraging friendship, not only in school but also towards others in different parts of the world. They make a good contribution in school by managing lots of responsibilities and supporting the school council. Beyond these, students raise money for charities and those who train as Junior Sports Leaders help by organising activities for local primary school pupils. Sports are important in the school and students enthusiastically take part. Together with the wholesome school lunches, their knowledge of eating well and staying fit, students have a healthy lifestyle. Behaviour is good, including those students with Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder whose challenging behaviour is managed effectively. Students stay safe and are aware of the need to be safe. To the extent

they can, students work with a good degree of independence in the technology workshop. Students' good personal development and satisfactory progress in gaining the skills they will need means they leave school soundly prepared for the future.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The quality of teaching and learning across the school is not always effective. The number of good lessons is offset by those that are satisfactory and the few that are inadequate. This is partly because staffing has been in flux and is not yet entirely settled. There is also too much variation in the quality of lesson planning which affects how well students learn. Teachers' learning objectives for their lessons are sometimes too vague. In the good lessons seen they were written clearly, shared effectively with students who could see the purpose of their work and this ensured profitable learning took place. At the end of these lessons, time was well spent with students evaluating their progress. Otherwise, evaluations did not take place or were not focused on what students achieved. One of the difficulties in identifying objectives concerns the limited extent of assessing what students have learnt. Assessment procedures measure changes in attainment levels at a few points in the year. They do not interrogate sufficiently in much shorter time spans where students are struggling in order to promptly adapt lesson plans to deal with this. There is good practice being developed in mathematics teaching, the impact of which is being seen in results. Limited assessment detracts from effective planning and, ultimately, how well students are engaged in learning and are challenged by their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The curriculum offers students a broad programme of work and activities that matches their capabilities. In key respects these match students' interests and talents, particularly through sports and club activities. Practical subjects have been planned well to engage and challenge students. ICT stands out in this respect and, here, students achieve well. Design and technology, food technology, art and physical education are all well organised and offer students exciting activities. Sound use is made of National Curriculum programmes of study, the literacy and numeracy strategies, accredited courses and work related learning. Mini-enterprise projects contribute to students learning about the world of work and business. However, with the limitations of assessment, the curriculum is often not adapted thoroughly enough to be really effective in meeting individual needs. The opportunities for independent learning are limited. The targets in students' individual education plans are too broad. The use of the form period at the start of most days as the time to work on these targets has too variable an impact on students' progress.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Students are well cared for and are given good support in developing their physical and emotional well-being. Safeguarding procedures are in place and strong links with external support agencies contribute towards a well coordinated response to student's wider needs, their statements and care plans in particular. The school manages soundly the wide range of students' learning difficulties and disabilities. Teaching assistants are particularly effective in this respect. Autistic

students are effectively integrated with others and, if they need time out of class, have their own base to go to. Good relationships with staff, clear expectations on how to behave and close supervision helps promote good behaviour throughout the day. Regular attendance is actively encouraged. Assessment is largely a periodic check on improvements in attainment levels and support and guidance on progress in lessons is not sufficiently focused on raising achievement.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The headteacher has a clear vision for the school by which he has set its direction and this gives focus to raising achievement. The rate of improvement is satisfactory but it has been hampered by the turnover of staff. Since the school's previous inspection, satisfactory progress has been made on increasing vocational courses for students and in the extent to which governors hold the school to account. The capacity for further improvement is satisfactory. The headteacher is seeking to increase the membership of the senior leadership team. However, the team is not firmly established and there is a lack of clarity in who takes the lead on raising the quality of teaching and learning, assessment and the curriculum. The school is addressing this issue and most heads of departments are effective leaders, which is having a positive impact on subjects such as mathematics, ICT, design and technology and physical education. Many teaching assistants have a range of responsibilities which they perform well. All of the leaders maintain a system of monitoring and evaluation, the impact of which is satisfactory. While there is some improvement in how lessons are planned as a result of monitoring, there is some lack of understanding of the link between sharply focused lesson planning and effective learning. The school's contribution to community cohesion is good. It has a good partnership with parents, schools and colleges. Its after-school sports activities are open to people in Stevenage. The school develops students' awareness of national and global issues and encourages them to take an interest in, and support, good causes.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
---	----------------

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	3

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	3
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	2
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	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2
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

16 February 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of The Valley School, Stevenage, SG2 9AB

My colleague and I really enjoyed our two days visiting your school. It was made all the more enjoyable by your friendliness. I thank you for your contributions to the inspection and, especially, the members of the school council who talked about what they thought of your school.

I was pleased to see that you enjoy school and much of this is down to the staff making your school so welcoming for all of you. You are learning to be healthy, which is helped greatly by the many sports activities you take part in. You behave well and are kind to others.

Having looked at your examination results and your work in lessons, I think you are making satisfactory progress. I have asked Mr Harrison and the staff to measure your progress more regularly and to plan your lessons and targets in better detail, as this will lead to you achieving more.

I wish you all the best for the future.

Alan Lemon

Lead inspector