

Five Acre Wood School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	119055
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	326934
Inspection dates	25–26 February 2009
Reporting inspector	Anne Duffy HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

The registered childcare, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	4–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	120
Sixth form	28
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	0
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Baker
Headteacher	Peggy Murphy
Date of previous school inspection	25 April 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Boughton Lane Maidstone ME15 9QL
Telephone number	01622 743925
Fax number	01622 744828

Age group	4–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Description of the school

Five Acre Wood School provides for pupils who have profound, severe and complex learning needs. All pupils have a statement of special educational needs and the majority use alternative or augmentative methods of communication. A small minority are looked-after children. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is around the national average, as is the mobility rate. The largest group is White British and the percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups is lower than average. The proportion for whom English is not their first language is also lower than average.

The school is growing towards a roll of 210. It shares its site with a number of other buildings and providers and, as part of the county-wide change for all Kent special schools, its future relocation is being considered. Older students attend classes in a nearby specialist sports college and there are plans to base all post-16 students there from September 2009. The headteacher joined the school in January 2009.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Five Acre Wood is a good school which makes an outstanding contribution to the personal development of its pupils. Despite the severe restrictions placed upon it by the site, and uncertainty about its ultimate location, it meets the needs of an increasingly wide range of pupils well. As one parent writes, 'Every year we have seen good progress, our son is more confident and is progressing well.'

Pupils' achievement is good. Because of their significant learning difficulties and/or disabilities, all pupils enter school with a level of attainment that is well below their chronological age and reach standards that are well below those found nationally. A comprehensive tracking system is used effectively to identify the progress of individuals and to set challenging targets so that good progress is made overall. A key factor in the drive to raise standards and achievement is a strong curriculum that is increasingly tailored to meet the needs of all the pupils. Teaching and learning are good. The school has a robust system for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning; teachers appreciate the guidance provided by senior staff, which has helped them to improve their practice. Relationships between pupils and staff are extremely positive, contributing to pupils' enjoyment of lessons and outstanding behaviour. Sometimes, however, not enough attention is paid to securing learning in lessons and opportunities for pupils to learn independently are missed. The range of awards held by the school, which include the Healthy School award, Inclusion Quality Mark, Sportsmark and Activemark, is indicative of the commitment to providing a wealth of good-quality experiences for its pupils. Pupils gain in confidence through the wide range of activities that are on offer within and outside the school and their personal development and well-being are outstanding. Pupils and parents alike value the level of care shown by the school, and care, guidance and support are good. The different types of communication which different pupils need are well known to staff but not always used consistently. However, this does not stop students from becoming confident communicators.

Although the headteacher is too new to have had much impact as yet, she is thoughtful and evaluative in her approach. She is supported very ably by the strong management team and the governing body, resulting in good leadership and management. The school is well placed to move forward into a further phase of improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The provision made for sixth form students is good. Because of their learning difficulties and/or disabilities, students reach standards that are below those expected nationally. However, they make good progress, gaining a range of accreditation on mainly vocational programmes. Students also gain recognition for their skills through becoming sports leaders and their participation in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Teaching is good and planning is effectively supported by secure knowledge about each student's strengths and weaknesses. Students' literacy and numeracy skills develop most effectively when practised within practical activities and vocational programmes.

Students' personal development is outstanding. Students enjoy their education and benefit from the good variety of curriculum and extensive enrichment activities provided. Care, guidance and support are good. There is a strong focus on promoting life skills through enjoyable

activities. This sometimes results in students evaluating what they have done, rather than what they have learned, so that opportunities for them to plan the next steps themselves are restricted. Leadership and management of the sixth form are good. Students' academic and personal development are supported well by the good joint learning opportunities provided through the inclusion base in the nearby sports college. Rigorous self-evaluation by the senior leadership team has rightly identified the extension of this into full-time provision as being the right move for the students. The school is aware that this will have budget and therapy implications and is planning accordingly.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Children's first experience of school is approached sensitively. Links between pre-school, school and home are established before Reception, helping children to settle quickly and feel safe. Good progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage, particularly in communication and personal development, means that they enter Year 1 with increased levels of attainment. Their good achievement is the result of good teaching and opportunities to learn through different experiences. Children are encouraged to make choices as far as possible and they gradually develop good attitudes to learning. They show their enjoyment by their growing involvement in what they are doing themselves and increasing interest in watching each other.

Early identification of, and additional support for, children's individual needs are effective. Planning is well informed through observation. Record keeping, which relates both to the early learning goals and P scales, facilitates transfer to Key Stage 1. Organisation of the Early Years Foundation Stage means that children can play and learn in need-specific groups which make the most of the particular skills of the staff. The curriculum is good but the constraints of the site limit the opportunities for outdoor learning. The welfare of the children is a priority for all staff and their interest and dedication result in excellent care in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Children's attention is drawn appropriately to potentially unsafe behaviour as their awareness of others grows. Children are encouraged to eat healthily. The leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage are good; the school's senior leadership team is aware of what more could be done to ensure that all children are helped to achieve as well as they can.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that all teaching activities actively promote independent learning at an appropriate level for every pupil.
- Ensure that the school's expressed intention to provide a communication approach in which 'the use of signs and symbols is embedded' is fulfilled.
- Extend opportunities for outdoor learning, particularly in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

The attainment of pupils on entry to the school is far below that usually found for those of a similar age, and remains so because of the nature of their learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Despite this, all pupils make good, and some make outstanding, progress. 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.

Processes for assessment, tracking and monitoring are thorough and ensure that the progress of both individuals and groups are analysed and gaps in progress identified.

Throughout their time in the school, pupils make good progress through the P levels towards the early levels of the National Curriculum. The school's tracking information shows that pupils achieve well in all phases of their education and across the different groups within the school. The greatest progress is made when learners receive high quality teaching and support that enables them to take an active part in their own learning. The school's efforts to increase progress in writing have been effective so that achievement in English is particularly good. The school is effectively addressing an identified shortfall in some areas of mathematics. In the Early Years Foundation Stage, children make good gains in their learning. At post-16, students achieve well and have benefited from an increase in the range of accredited courses.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils thoroughly enjoy school. From the very early stages of their education, they demonstrate pride in their achievements and there is a very real sense of shared pleasure when a new skill is mastered. Pupils move safely around the different areas of the school and have confidence in every member of staff. As a result, they feel secure in a range of situations and are willing to attempt new tasks without anxiety. Although attendance is sometimes affected by one or two pupils who find it hard to come to school, the very large majority demonstrate their enthusiasm by regular attendance, affected only by health needs or the demands of medical appointments.

Behaviour overall is outstanding and pupils are very tolerant of one another. This is particularly evident in situations such as the school council where an individual's ideas are considered and responded to with courtesy, demonstrating excellent social and moral development. Spiritual and cultural development is equally strong and pupils enjoy learning about different cultures and countries through music, art and the 'themed' days such as French day.

Although the school is restricted in what it can offer on its own site, pupils respond very well to the opportunities for physical activity which are provided elsewhere. Opportunities to cook are enjoyed greatly and help pupils to make individual and healthy choices about what they will eat. Younger pupils take their duties seriously, for example taking part in planning the school disco which will raise money for charity. Older pupils develop entrepreneurial skills which have resulted in them winning a team enterprise award for the past three years. As a result, they develop the independence and self-confidence which will help them in future. As one student so aptly put it, 'I think we can make a profit here.'

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teachers plan their lessons carefully and make effective use of a range of pictures, objects and sounds to encourage choice and support learning. Teaching assistants know the pupils well and there are excellent relationships between staff and pupils. Pupils join in their lessons with enthusiasm. They build well upon skills and knowledge gained from previous lessons and demonstrate that they are making good progress over time. In the best lessons, even the youngest pupils are able to evaluate how well they have done and which skills they have

mastered. Occasionally, there is an over-emphasis upon 'good sitting' or 'good listening' so that the focus of the lesson, and good learning, is lost. As a result, pupils become too involved in evaluating how well they have behaved rather than what they have learnt. Pupils actively enjoy learning when they are involved in an activity in which they can take the lead, such as when following and giving instructions to create a map of the school. However, this is not always the case and in some classes pupils are given the same task to do. Where this happens, progress is not as fast as it might be for the more able, and teaching assistants intervene to get tasks done for those who may be struggling. As a result, opportunities for independent learning are missed.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum responds increasingly flexibly to the needs of all pupils. It is further extended by opportunities to participate in learning and sport at the specialist sports college in which the school has a secondary base. Provision of a curriculum that is more personalised according to pupils' needs, interests and ambitions is at the heart of the school's recent developments. Although it is too early to judge fully the impact of recent changes, early indications are that both students and staff are responding positively and with increased enthusiasm. The strength of the curriculum at post-16 level is indicated by the full take-up by the school's own Year 11 pupils as well as those who join from other schools. All move on to further education, employment and training. This reflects the school's strong commitment to equality of opportunity for the increasingly diverse needs of its learners. The curriculum is enhanced further through a wide range of enrichment activities which include sport, dancing, stable management and gardening. Students are clearly enthused by the opportunities available to them and their work reflects how much they enjoy the 'themed' days. They respond well to opportunities to learn about other faiths and cultures and older students are kept well up to date with current events.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Pupils' care and welfare are given a high priority. All arrangements for safeguarding are securely in place and evident care is taken by the school to meet pupils' physical and emotional needs. Good links with outside agencies, including the children with disabilities team based in the school, mean that there is a wide range of support available. Although a few parents would welcome closer involvement with the therapists in school, physiotherapy and occupational therapy programmes are carried out conscientiously. The school's policy on augmentative communication is sound but occasionally unrealised. Pupils make full use of picture exchange for communication, but signing is not used consistently and displayed work and notices around the school are not all accessible for all types of communication users or readers.

Good use is made of photographs to record skills that have been mastered. Where these are linked to levelled progress, they help pupils and their parents to see clearly how much progress has been made and what the next steps might be. Older students are guided well to achieve realistic long-term goals so that they look to the future with confidence. They appreciate the helpful advice which they receive about the options available to them and the wide range of work-related opportunities that exist within and outside the school.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Issues arising from the last inspection have been addressed effectively and, with the recent appointment of the new headteacher, the school is poised to embark upon a new phase of development. The already strong vision of the leadership team has been enhanced by the perspective of the new headteacher, and staff speak very positively of the team ethos which exists across the school.

The large majority of parents express satisfaction with the school and how it is led and managed, but the headteacher and chair of governors have correctly identified links with parents as an area that could be further strengthened. The school has a comprehensive approach to promoting community cohesion, with good systems for evaluating its impact. Its close relationship with the neighbouring sports college, and involvement in local, national and international initiatives, provide the students with good opportunities to be ambassadors for disability in their own and the wider community.

Realistic self-evaluation has helped the school to address identified areas for development well. The very real impact of this is evident in the revised curriculum. Appropriately accurate and challenging targets are set and school leaders have a clear understanding of how well individual students are progressing. Rigorous monitoring, coupled with well-focused professional development, shows that the school is striving effectively for continuing improvement. It has been hampered in this to some extent by the uncertainty about its future role and location, which has resulted in an environment that does not adequately support all areas of learning, particularly outdoors. However, resources are deployed effectively and the governing body is now taking steps to move the school forward on its existing site. Governors are very supportive of the school and have worked well to steer it effectively through a change of leadership. The governing body's skilled and experienced members are able to provide a very appropriate level of challenge and the school has good capacity for further improvement.

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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	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 capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	2	
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	2	
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	1	
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	2	
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1	
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	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/or disabilities make progress	2	2

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	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	1	
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?	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

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	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	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	

Annex B

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Five Acre Wood School, Maidstone ME15 9QL

Thank you for helping me to learn about your school. I really enjoyed my visit. It was good to meet so many of you and to see how well you are doing. I am writing this letter to tell you what I found.

I think Five Acre Wood is a good school where you make good progress. You all seem to enjoy school; you are safe and very well cared for and this helps you to grow into very impressive young people. There are plenty of interesting things for you to do in and out of school. I enjoyed looking at the photographs of all the things that you have done and the records of what you have achieved. The school council is very business-like and it was good to see so many of you take part. Many of you are excellent cooks and I really liked my lunch with some of you and coffee and biscuits with the older students. Thank you!

Your new headteacher has some good ideas for the school and all the staff work hard to help you. It is important that everyone who works with you helps you to learn on your own as much as you can. Many of you use symbols and signing and I have asked the staff to make sure that they do too. Although your school does not have much space I have asked your headteacher to try to find more places for you all, especially the younger children, to learn outside.

I am sure that you will all try your best and wish you good luck for the future.

Yours faithfully

Anne Duffy

Her Majesty's Inspector