

Fred Nicholson School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	121256
Local Authority	Norfolk
Inspection number	327436
Inspection dates	27–28 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Jill Bavin

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

Boarding provision	
Social care URN	
Social care inspector	Dorrit Andrews

The inspection of social care was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	7–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	101
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Tim Lesiuck
Headteacher	Mrs Alison Kahn
Date of previous school inspection	14 June 2006
School address	Westfield Road Toftwood Dereham Norfolk NR19 1JB
Telephone number	01362 693915
Fax number	01362 693298

Age group	7–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Fred Nicholson School is a residential special school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. The pupils currently on roll have a wider range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Many pupils have complex needs. Attainment on entry is very low. More than a third of pupils have significant behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Nearly a quarter of pupils are within the autistic spectrum. A small percentage of pupils have additional physical or sensory disabilities, and a small percentage have severe learning difficulties.

Since the previous inspection, the school has opened Orchard House, a resource base for six pupils with autistic spectrum disorders who also have additional needs, which include sensory disabilities and emotional difficulties. The school is organised into a lower and upper school. The lower school provides for pupils between Years 4 and 8. The upper school caters for pupils between Years 9 and 11.

The school's residential provision caters for 26 pupils and currently 20 pupils stay at the school during term time. Most pupils travel to school from a wide area of Norfolk and the local authority provides for their transportation. Just over a quarter of the pupils on roll are girls. The school is emerging from a period of some turbulence because of significant changes of staff and has some difficulty recruiting suitably qualified staff. The senior leadership team has been together since April 2007. While there has been some difficulty in recruiting governors, there is now a full governing body.

The school has held the National Healthy School's Award since 2006. It gained the Silver Artsmark award in 2007 and more recently the International Schools and Career Excellence Awards.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This good school enables pupils to achieve well. Most commonly, pupils arrive at Fred Nicholson School having experienced considerable disruption to their learning and with little self-belief. Standards are appropriate for the pupils, reflecting their learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Although the nature and extent of their learning difficulties varies, most commonly, pupils have social communication difficulties arising either from emotional, academic or sensory disabilities. A significant minority of pupils have extremely challenging behaviour. Pupils identify and share their pride in their progress, for example by saying, 'I can read now', or 'I like writing stories better than maths, but I'm doing well in maths because I can tell the time using an analogue clock now'. Parents are very supportive of the school's work and are pleased with their children's progress. Comments such as, 'He knows he is lucky to be there' reflect the views of many.

Staff work well together so that pupils receive consistent messages about what is expected of them both socially and academically. Teaching and learning are good, which is an improvement since the previous inspection. The challenge in pupils' activities has increased and ineffective teaching has been eradicated. Pupils make good progress in most lessons because nearly all teachers plan effectively and take account of pupils' individual needs. Teachers' planning makes clear the learning intentions and success criteria for lessons and this process successfully involves pupils in effective learning. However, this is not consistent and in some lessons, planning is less well focused, with good learning and progress less assured. In the academic subjects, in particular, work and activities are not always made as relevant and interesting as they are in more practical subjects.

Pupils' personal development and well-being and the care, guidance and support they receive are good. The oldest pupils demonstrate considerable maturity in their attitudes to their work, to visitors and to each other. Pupils benefit from consistent expectations of their behaviour. Pupils of all ages obviously enjoy school and many thoughtfully voice their appreciation for the help they receive. Their good rates of attendance reflect their enjoyment and pride in the school, and contribute much to their achievement.

The curriculum is good, and has benefited from recent significant improvement. This includes the re-organisation of classes, which enables teachers to provide more individual learning programmes for pupils with severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities and for the younger pupils within the autistic spectrum in the main school, as well as for the pupils in Orchard House. Additionally, the school has kept pace with the latest national recommendations for pupils in the lower school, by ensuring that there is a good focus on learning through links between subjects and through creative activities. Pupils in the upper school are benefiting from an increased range of accredited courses.

Leadership and management are effective and there have been good improvements in the curriculum, teaching and pupils' achievement. The headteacher leads with calm vision and successfully empowers a staff team who reflect on their practice and are committed to continued school improvement. She is ably supported by senior colleagues. As governors are now better informed than previously, governance is good and it acts effectively in supporting and challenging the school's direction. These leadership strengths account for the fast pace of improvement and demonstrate clearly a good capacity for further improvement. Much monitoring and evaluation has meant that the school has been able to review and develop its systems for

measuring and tracking pupils' progress. The system currently being used is relatively new and yet to be embedded. As a result, targets for pupils have turned out to be over ambitious.

Effectiveness of boarding provision

Grade: 2

The quality of boarding provision is good, with five outcome areas judged as good and one as outstanding. The school meets nearly all key National Minimum Standards (NMS) and exceeds a number of them in relation to the individual support provided to boarding pupils.

Pastoral care is a strength of the school and boarders receive outstanding individual support in line with their needs. Good communication systems across the school also contribute effectively to pupils' welfare. The physical and emotional health needs of pupils are promoted and supported well in partnership with other professionals. Qualified first aid staff are always available on duty and staff follow clear procedures for the management and administration of medication. Good records are maintained and medication is stored securely. Good emphasis is placed on healthy eating and pupils contribute their ideas to menus: a number of pupils refer positively to their favourite meals and the range of food provided.

Staff are very aware of their responsibilities toward pupils in their care, and strong links are maintained with other professionals concerned with safeguarding children. All staff receive appropriate child protection training and regular updates. Pupils do not identify bullying as a problem at the school and there is a clear understanding of what they should do if someone is making them unhappy. Staff are vigilant in their supervision of pupils and engage them in 'staying safe' discussions and activities. Pupils benefit greatly from this work and state that, 'It makes us feel safer'.

The management of behaviour is based on establishing positive relationships with pupils and communicating clear expectations. Staff receive regular training and maintain records of sanctions and the use of physical intervention. However, some records do not fully include the criteria required.

Health and safety matters are taken seriously by the school. Risk assessments, policies and procedures are in place to support the maintenance of a safe environment for pupils, staff and visitors. Good procedures are in place for the recruitment and checking of staff.

The boarding provision actively supports the educational progress of pupils through a range of initiatives. Care staff provide good opportunities for pupils to develop knowledge and life skills within an emotionally supportive environment. The newly introduced activities programme develops pupils' social skills, increases their confidence and self-esteem as well as providing opportunities to keep active and to relax. A number of pupils refer to activities 'being fun' and 'helping me to do things for myself'.

Pupils' views are actively sought and encouraged. Current forums include the school council, group meetings and key worker sessions. Pupils appreciate their ideas being listened to and acted upon: they highlight recent changes to menus and the beginning of refurbishment projects as good examples.

Boarding accommodation is pleasantly decorated, furnished and clean and is provided on the school site. Staff have worked hard to provide a welcoming environment for boarders and encourage the personalisation of sleeping areas.

The leadership and management of boarding is strong and contributes highly to the overall outcomes for pupils. Staffing levels outside teaching time are sufficient for the number of

boarders and the activities they are involved in. Boarders report that they always know who is on duty and that night staff are readily available and always respond kindly to them.

Boarders are looked after by experienced, well trained and competent staff who understand their needs and help them to progress and achieve. The low turnover of staff provides boarders with consistency, stability and promotes positive relationships.

Systems are in place for the monitoring of pupils' welfare both internally and by the local authority. However, a monitoring visit by the local authority did not take place as required last term and not all records checked are signed to show evidence that monitoring has taken place.

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- Ensure that the record of restraints fully meets the criteria set out in the National Minimum Standards (NMS 10.9).
- Ensure that monitored records are signed to evidence that monitoring has taken place (NMS 32.2).
- Ensure that monitoring visits are undertaken by the local authority at the frequency required (NMS 33.2).

What the school should do to improve further

- Embed the system for measuring and tracking progress and ensure teachers use it effectively to set appropriately challenging targets for pupils.
- Ensure that work and activities are always relevant and interesting to pupils, especially in academic subjects.
- Share the best practice in teachers' planning to ensure that identifying what pupils need to do and how to measure their success is always clear.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Achievement is good and key strengths lie in pupils' gains in self-control and exercising independence, born of improved social communication. For example, pupils in Orchard House improve eye contact and conversational skills because of their increased sense of security and very good relationships with staff. Pupils with severe learning difficulties increase their understanding of language and using key vocabulary appropriately. Pupils with behavioural difficulties learn effectively to express themselves verbally without presenting challenging behaviour. Clearly, these gains increase their readiness to learn. Good communication between care and teaching staff contributes to these successes. Because staff share aims and strategies for achieving success with pupils, boarders receive consistent reinforcement in their learning. This helps them to consolidate and accelerate their progress. Younger pupils do well in acquiring basic practical, literacy and numeracy skills. Older pupils achieve well in an increasing range of accredited courses, including gaining success in GCSE art and entry-level English and mathematics. Pupils make rapid progress in the recently introduced travel independence programme. When pupils leave the school, they have all achieved success in work-related learning and all go on to attend a college course or training course.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils remark, 'This school makes everyone feel special'. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Pupils make good progress in their understanding of right and wrong, and in their social skills. Most pupils behave well. They are polite and courteous to visitors, relaxed with staff and good humoured with each other. For most of the time they work well together, although there are instances of unacceptable behaviour involving a small group of pupils with severe social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. However, good management of behaviour minimises this and the incidence of exclusions has dramatically reduced. Pupils are enthusiastic about the many opportunities to pursue physical activities. They have a good awareness of strategies for keeping healthy and staying safe. Pupils respond well to opportunities for taking responsibility and several use their initiative and offer help to visitors. Pupils' good nature and willingness to help are not used to their full potential by increasing their roles of responsibility and extending the remit for the school council in particular. Because leaders have developed good community links, pupils enjoy plenty of opportunities to broaden their experience and participate in the local community. The school's international links mean that pupils are developing a good understanding of global responsibilities, for example by selling crafts for pupils at a school in India.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teachers and teaching assistants know their pupils extremely well and relationships between the adults and pupils are good. This is a key factor in setting pupils a consistently good example of how to behave, and supports the positive behaviour management that pervades the school. The marked improvement in teaching means that teaching and learning are predominately good. There is still some teaching, which, while satisfactory, does not promote pupils' learning as effectively as most lessons do because their work is not challenging enough. Planning is not as precise in identifying what pupils need to do and what to measure to gauge their success. This makes it harder for pupils to understand what they are aiming for. There are also examples of outstanding teaching spread throughout the school. This is characterised by impressively skilful class organisation. This means, for example, every teaching assistant is deployed highly effectively throughout the session. Transition from individual work to class work are seamless and very precise assessment means everyone, including the pupils, is extremely clear about expectations.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good because schemes of work have been substantially revised to suit the needs of current pupils throughout the school. There is a strong emphasis on organising work and activities matched to individual pupils' levels of ability and building systematically on this, both in Orchard House and in the main school. Where it is the best route to helping pupils, the school provides highly individualised programmes of learning. In addition, emphasis is placed on the skills and knowledge that will make a particular difference to the quality of pupils' future lives. Good liaison between teaching and care staff ensures that this continues after school for boarders. In some of the more academic lessons, the work and activities planned are not adapted

as fully as possible to ensure the greatest relevance for pupils. An extensive range of enrichment activities, notably sport, aid learning and the school successfully fosters pupils' personal interests such as playing in a band. There is an extensive programme of work-related learning and a rapidly increasing range of accreditation opportunities, which are now good.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Safeguarding and child protection policies meet current requirements. As pupils' personal development is central to the work of all staff, their progress in attitudes to learning and towards independence is good. Effective teamwork in school and with care staff, including links with outside professionals, enables staff to work closely together and this benefits pupils' well-being. Pupils feel safe and very well cared for and are confident that there is always an adult to turn to if necessary. The school successfully maintains a good attendance record for pupils, often in spite of their increased medical needs. Pupils are extremely well informed about their progress in improving their behaviour and communication skills. Good behaviour and effort are successfully encouraged through rewards and privileges. In spite of some inconsistencies, pupils are well informed about progress in lessons. Pupils' personal development is monitored closely and pupils in the boarding provision have good opportunities to voice their ideas and wishes.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Staff appreciate the successful collegiate leadership style of the headteacher and her senior colleagues. Senior staff have a good understanding of the school's strengths and what needs to be improved. There are examples of effective mentoring which has led to more support and improvements to teaching and learning. Having trialled and rejected several systems for tracking each pupil's progress, the school has recently committed to one appropriately. Suitable steps have already begun to analyse the emerging information, and additional systems are in place for the school to augment this as the weight of information increases. The first targets generated by the system turned out to be too challenging for some pupils and the school is rightly identifying the need to ensure that targets are more reliably realistic. There is a strong and shared culture of reflection and evaluation in order to drive school improvements. Governors are better informed than at the time of the previous inspection and are fully involved in monitoring the impact of school developments. They hold the school to account well.

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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?	2
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 effectiveness of boarding provision	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	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?	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	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	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	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	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?	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
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**

29 January 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Fred Nicholson School, Dereham, NR19 1JB

You may remember that we came to inspect your school recently. Thank you for all the help you gave us. We enjoyed meeting you and hearing your views about the school. We were really pleased that you often volunteered to help us find our way around the school and invited us to see your work and hear you explain what you were doing.

We agree with you and your parents that you have a good school. We were especially pleased when you told us how well you are making progress and showed us examples of what you can do now, that you could not do before. You all have a good chance to prepare well for work and leaving school. It is particularly impressive that all of you, when you leave school, go on to college or training.

You know that the adults in school and in the boarding provision care about you, so you feel safe and have a good time. We are pleased that you enjoy school so much and we can understand why, with all the different activities that you do. It was good to hear that staff helped when you wanted to set up a band, and how much you enjoy all the different sports activities. You understand that some pupils find it difficult to behave well all of the time, but you are kind to each other and mostly get on well together. We think the effort you make to sell crafts to raise money for pupils in India is really good. Well done!

To make your good school even better, we are asking the headteacher, governors and staff to:

- make sure that the learning targets they set for you are always achievable
- make sure that the content of lessons is always interesting for you
- share the best ways to plan lessons, so that teachers are always very clear about what they want you to learn.

Thank you again for all your help during our visit. We wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Jill Bavin

Lead inspector