

The Ashley School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124904
Local Authority	Suffolk
Inspection number	328239
Inspection dates	10–11 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Sue Aldridge

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 under pilot arrangements; it was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	7–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	127
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Dale Gowen
Headteacher	Mrs Lorraine Dupen
Date of previous school inspection	14–15 June 2006
School address	Ashley Downs Lowestoft Suffolk NR32 4EU
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Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector, who visited eight lessons, and held meetings with governors, staff, the cluster coordinator for extended schools and the school's council. The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised key policies and other school documents and analysed 44 parental questionnaires.

The inspector reviewed many aspects of the school's work and looked in detail at the following:

- the impact of specialist status on the provision and outcomes for pupils at Ashley and those supported by the school's outreach service
- the quality of pupils' multicultural awareness
- how effectively the new leadership team is working.

Information about the school

The Ashley School provides day and residential education for pupils with mainly moderate learning difficulties, although many have associated disabilities such as speech and language difficulties, autism, and behaviour difficulties. Pupils come from a wide area of north Suffolk and all are transported to school. In recent years an increasing proportion of pupils with complex needs has been admitted. All pupils have a statement of special educational needs. Almost all are from White British backgrounds and the percentage eligible for free school meals is well above average. Pupils enter the school at any time during Years 3 to 10 with attainment that is well below average because they have often had disrupted education and poor attendance. Since the last inspection, the school has acquired specialist status for cognition and learning. It has also developed an outreach service providing support for pupils and staff in mainstream schools. The headteacher retired in July 2008 and the deputy headteacher was appointed as headteacher. The school's work has been recognised by a number of awards, including Investors in People, the Healthy Schools Award, Artsmark and Sportsmark.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Ashley is an outward looking school that strives to provide the best for its own pupils and to support pupils with similar difficulties in local schools through its outreach service. In recent years it has moved from being on the periphery of developments within its consortium of schools to taking a lead in developing innovative practice. Its status as a specialist school has provided additional funds that have been used effectively to improve the school's accommodation, thus broadening learning experiences for pupils and the community. It has also been used effectively to develop staff skills at Ashley and enabled the school to extend its well-respected outreach service to support pupils and staff in mainstream schools.

There has been very good improvement since the last inspection. Prior to the retirement of the previous headteacher, there was careful planning for the change of leadership. Following her appointment, the headteacher restructured the leadership team to reflect the school's proposed development, particularly its leadership in the local area of 14 to 19 developments in the Foundation learning tier of the new diploma. Because the team has a mix of members who have been at the school some time and new staff have received effective induction, the team has been able to 'hit the ground running'. There has been no interruption to the pace of development. There is a change in vision, and the school is embarking on consultation with a view to pursuing foundation status. Its capacity for further improvement is good. The only factor that prevents it from being outstanding is that its self-evaluation is not always detailed enough to identify precisely the impact of developments. This is mainly because there is insufficient analysis of data collected through evaluation activities. As a result, governors do not have information in a form that enables them to easily monitor policies such as those relating to equalities.

The school's greatest success lies in developing pupils' personal skills and qualities. This is linked to an outstanding curriculum, the excellent quality of support, guidance and care and outstanding partnerships with parents. Pupils' outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is evident in many ways. Behaviour is excellent. Pupils have a very well developed cultural awareness. They respect the school rules, show a very good awareness of how to keep themselves safe and assist in identifying risks in school. The school council's anti-bullying survey showed few concerns, and the school responded quickly to those raised, for example by increasing supervision in the playground. Pupils say they feel much safer there now. Their huge enjoyment of school is well reflected in good attendance and outstanding

participation rates in extra-curricular activities. Pupils make healthy eating and drinking choices at school. Older pupils are successful in encouraging healthy lifestyles by working in primary schools as junior sports leaders or as ambassadors leading activities at a local leisure centre. Pupils take seriously the wide range of responsibilities they have at school. Younger pupils entertain local people with their singing, older pupils participate in community projects, such as in a nearby park, and all help to raise funds for charities at home and abroad.

Parents are fully involved in their child's learning and receive a good deal of information. Support mechanisms extend to families and the great majority of parents express strong satisfaction with the school. Parental views are taken seriously and are acted upon. Parental support is welcomed and a parent governor has been instrumental in setting up a community drama group that uses the school's drama studio.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen self-evaluation by:
 - analysing data collected so that the impact of developments can be easily seen
 - presenting the analysed data to governors so that they can more readily monitor equality of opportunity.

How good is the overall outcome for individuals and groups of pupils?

1

Pupils thoroughly enjoy school and they achieve well. Although standards remain below or well below average by the end of Year 11, this is a reflection of the nature and extent of pupils' learning difficulties, rather than the progress that they make, which is good. The good quality of teaching and pupils' excellent behaviour and positive attitudes to learning contribute to good learning and progress in lessons. Academic progress can be slow to start with, but once pupils have settled and their behaviour, adjustment and attendance improves, progress accelerates rapidly. The high quality support that pupils receive coupled with good teaching and assessment, underpin this good achievement. Careful tracking of pupils' progress enables the school to intervene quickly when pupils do not make the progress expected. However, its analysis is not yet sophisticated enough to identify the impact of interventions on progress rates. Analysis of the progress made by pupils of different genders and needs groups shows that all make equally good progress. By Year 11 standards are highest in science and mathematics where, in 2008, Year 11 pupils achieved GCSE passes at grades D to G. Pupils make good progress in English. Good achievement in art is well reflected in the high quality of work on display in the school. In physical education, full trophy cabinets testify to pupils' successes in competitive events, and the school is justifiably proud of the fact that six of its pupils have been selected for sponsored coaching with a view to representing Great Britain in the 2012 Olympics.

Thoughtful and wide ranging teaching about others' cultures and customs, as well as

other differences between people, engenders in the pupils tolerance and respect for one another and those of different races and religions. Pupils described how staff provide excellent role models in showing respect for other faiths. When they help to plan themed days or run a horticultural mini-business, pupils develop well their enterprise skills. Through careers education, vocational studies and work experience, pupils develop a good awareness of the world of work, and the progress they make in developing basic skills stands them in good stead when they are ready to leave.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' attainment ¹	4
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their progress	2
How well do pupils achieve and enjoy their learning?	2
To what extent do pupils feel safe?	1
How well do pupils behave?	1
To what extent do pupils adopt healthy lifestyles?	1
To what extent do pupils contribute to the school and wider community?	1
Pupils' attendance	2
How well do pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being?	2
What is the extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development?	1

The quality of the school's work

A particularly strong feature of the school's work is the involvement of pupils in their learning. In the most successful lessons there is a clear sense of adults and pupils being equal partners in the learning process. Teaching takes good account of pupils' prior learning and lessons often begin with a review of this so that teaching effectively consolidates, assesses and builds on previous learning. Careful explanation of the lesson objectives gives pupils a good idea of what they are expected to learn, and regular reminders of these and their personal targets maintains their awareness of their goals. Accurate assessment is used well to plan a range of different learning outcomes for pupils of different abilities, and tasks are well designed to provide a suitable challenge for all. For those that are able to work more quickly, extension tasks enable them to move to more challenging work. Teaching assistants provide good support in most lessons, prompting rather than giving answers so that pupils arrive at these themselves and grow in confidence. Teaching includes all, by ensuring that a variety of questions is asked and pupils of all abilities can take part in answering, and adults give pupils time to think and reflect when necessary too. Teaching at a fast pace is a feature of some of the most effective lessons. However, in a small number of lessons, a slow pace limits pupils' progress. Interesting and appealing tasks help to keep pupils' motivation high and pupils say that they enjoy their lessons. New technology is used well to present

¹ Grades for attainment are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; 4 is low

information, make learning interactive and provide access for some, such as visually impaired learners. Teaching also makes good use of resources that stimulate interest and bring learning to life, such as artefacts in religious education and video clips. Lessons close with a thorough review of learning and often incorporate self-assessment. Successes are celebrated and so pupils have a sense of achievement.

Effective assessment procedures underpin pupils' good progress. Pupils' personal targets for literacy, numeracy and social skills are reviewed termly and at the annual review of the statement, their progress in all subjects is reviewed. Pupils and their parents are effectively involved in both processes. Challenging targets are set and where pupils are not making the progress expected of them, the school quickly intervenes to provide support. Pupils know what their targets are and they are given frequent feedback about what they need to do to improve.

The school's curriculum is very well matched to the ages, abilities and individual needs of the pupils. It is highly innovative and makes very good use of a range of partnerships to secure opportunities that would not otherwise be available to learners. The curriculum at Key Stage 4 is particularly appealing to pupils. One of the younger members of the school council said, 'I can't wait to get to Key Stage 4!' Pupils in Years 10 and 11 have very good opportunities to take part in vocational courses as well as to gain accreditation at an appropriate level. In response to the school's evaluation and parental concerns about the lack of suitable provision after the age of 16, the school has embarked on an innovative partnership with an adjacent mainstream school. This is in the first year of a two-year pilot. Although pupils are on the roll of the secondary school, Ashley makes use of its staffing to provide significant support. It has yet to establish a means of formally evaluating the pilot to assess whether its resource commitment represents value for money. The curriculum also provides all pupils with excellent opportunities to develop personally. Wide involvement of outside agencies supplements the school's teaching about personal safety and healthy lifestyles. Curriculum enrichment, especially the range of sporting opportunities, is exceptionally good. The residential facility is used flexibly and effectively so that an extended day is possible.

Staff establish very good working relationships with pupils and know them very well. The school is quick to act to support any who are experiencing particular difficulties. It has a good range of support mechanisms on-site, such as nurture provision and 'Flat 28'. Here, pupils who are not accessing education in their current school come to help them continue learning and ultimately to be included within Ashley School and linking with mainstream education. Pupils feel very safe and well supported and turn to staff readily for help. Support extends to families as well as pupils, via the Pupil and Family Support team, and this in turn secures any external support deemed necessary. There is very effective signposting of pupils and families to services in their local communities. The Strengthening Families Programme provides a short course for pupils and parents to enable them to learn together how to deal with matters such as setting ground rules and resolving conflicts. Sampling of questionnaires completed at the end of these courses suggests that parents and pupils found it helps them to achieve their goals, but the questionnaire responses have not been collated or analysed. Vulnerable pupils are very well supported so that they overcome difficulties and improve their emotional well-being, behaviour and attendance. Good quality guidance helps pupils to feel confident about the choices

they make whilst at school and transition planning is timely and effective in guiding pupils in making decisions about post-16 placements.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

High quality teaching and purposeful learning	2
Effective assessment	2
An appropriate curriculum which meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, provision through partnership with other organisations	1
Support, guidance and care	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The school serves the community well by providing access to its facilities and through its outreach service. Several staff are key players in supporting others in developing effective practice. The school knows the needs of its pupils and the local community well and strives to ensure that pupils with learning difficulties have the same opportunities as others, and that their needs are met effectively. It has identified the need to develop the global dimension more fully and to this end has established 'seedling' links with a school in Kenya. While ensuring equality of opportunity is at the heart of all that it does, it is not always able to demonstrate the impact of its actions, including those resulting from an exceptionally wide range of partnerships, because of weaknesses in analysis of information it collects. This reduces the governors' ability to challenge and support the school in tackling any areas of relative weakness. Governors are supportive, they ask probing questions and contribute strongly to the current direction of the school. They also check first-hand on the work it does, through health and safety walks, for instance. This forms part of excellent arrangements to safeguard pupils.

These are the grades for leadership and management

Communicating ambition and driving improvement	2
Promoting equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination	3
Ensuring that safeguarding procedures are effective	1
Ensuring that the governing body provides effective challenge and support so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities are met	3
Promoting the school's relationship with parents and carers, including their involvement in decision-making about matters relating to learning and well-being	1
Developing partnerships with other providers, organisations and services	2
Ensuring the school contributes to community cohesion	2
Deploying resources to achieve value for money	2

Boarding provision

The boarding provision was not inspected as part of this inspection. It was last inspected in October 2008 when it was judged to be outstanding.

Views of parents and carers

In a relatively good return of completed questionnaires, parents showed very high levels of confidence in, and approval of, the school. Almost all feel that their children are making good progress at Ashley and enjoy coming to school. Many wrote positive comments. One that summed up the views of several commented, 'This school is great and I am so glad my son has been able to come here.' Others noted a marked improvement on their children's experience in previous schools. A small number said that they have found the office staff unhelpful but no evidence of this was seen.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. In 2007-8, 15% of schools were judged to be outstanding.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well. In 2007-8, 49% of schools were judged good.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils. In 2007-8, 32% of schools were judged satisfactory.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves. In 2007-8, 5% of schools were judged inadequate.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Achievement:	an overall measure of the pupils' success in their academic learning. The term combines attainment and progress. Pupils might make good progress, for example, but if their attainment remains low, inspectors may judge that their achievement is only satisfactory.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.



12 March 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of The Ashley School, Lowestoft, NR32 4EU

Thank you for making me welcome when I visited your school. I was pleased to be invited to join the school council meeting and thank those that talked to me about their experiences of school life.

I agree that your school is outstanding. Importantly, the teaching is good and you are making good progress in your lessons which you obviously enjoy. You make the best of all the opportunities that the school offers. The number of you that regularly take part in sports is particularly impressive. The school is very successful at helping you to learn to keep safe, to lead healthy lifestyles and to contribute to the school and the wider communities. It was good to see and hear how much you all enjoy school as this helps you to achieve so well. Your behaviour is excellent and attendance is good. You have an excellent range of different opportunities to help you learn and develop. The support that the school gives to you and your families is very good too. The staff and governors make sure that the school is a safe place and it was good to hear that you feel safe there.

Almost all of your parents are very pleased with what the school does for you and the staff involve them very well in helping you to learn and develop as young people.

The staff are very keen to make your school an even better place and so they keep on doing things to improve it further. One thing that staff do not always do is look carefully enough at their measurements of improvement to see what has been most successful and what might need to be tried differently. This makes it hard for the governors to do an important part of their work, which is to make sure that everyone has the same opportunities.

I wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Mrs S Aldridge
Lead inspector

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