

Dorchester Learning Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	130316
Local Authority	Dorset
Inspection number	328524
Inspection date	5 February 2009
Reporting inspector	Charles Hackett

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

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	102
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Headteacher	John Taylor
Date of previous school inspection	1 December 2005
School address	The Old Rectory Winterborne Monkton Dorchester DT2 9PS
Telephone number	01305 261213
Fax number	01305 261505

Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the centre and investigated the following issues:

- The effectiveness of the provision in meeting the needs of all pupils and providing them with equal opportunities to achieve
- Pupils' achievement and personal development whilst at the centre
- The effectiveness of teaching in matching work to pupils' differing needs and in providing guidance to pupils to support their learning
- The effectiveness of senior leaders and the management committee in monitoring the centre's work and bringing about improvements.

Evidence was gathered from lesson observations at the four sites the centre uses, and from discussions with pupils, staff, the head of service, one headteacher of a mainstream school who has close links to the centre, and a member of the management committee. In addition, evidence was gathered from a scrutiny of centre documentation and assessment information. Other aspects of the centre's work were not investigated in detail, but the inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the centre's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

The centre has a main teaching base close to Dorchester and uses three other sites elsewhere in the county to teach small groups of students. The majority of students who attend the centre are still on the roll of mainstream schools and are dual registered. The centre also caters for pupils who have been permanently excluded from a mainstream school, pupils with medical conditions that prevent attendance at mainstream and a few pupils not accessing other education, such as those belonging to traveller families. Permanently excluded pupils are offered full-time programmes and other pupils attend the centre for differing periods of time. The dual registered pupils' length of stay varies but for many is no longer than two terms. A few pupils are admitted with a statement of special educational needs and a few are in the care of the local authority. Occasionally a primary pupil is admitted for a short period whilst a permanent placement is secured.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Dorchester Learning Centre is a good pupil referral unit with outstanding aspects. Students who have previously failed to engage successfully in learning enjoy achieving in a very wide range of areas. An analysis of students' achievements shows that irrespective of the reason for them to be at the centre their achievement is good. This good achievement is one reason why many of the dual registered students in Years 7, 8 and 9 successfully return full time to a mainstream school. The very few primary pupils are also well supported and move back to a mainstream setting quickly.

Students achieve well in GCSEs. Standards are below average, demonstrating good progress from typically well below average starting points. This is of great credit to the centre because of the flexibility they have shown in making arrangements for all students, including those who are dual registered, to take their examinations in the centre rather than in a mainstream school. This policy is leading to far more students taking and achieving GCSEs than previously when they had to return to their mainstream school to take examinations. Results show that all Year 11 students achieve at least one GCSE, whilst a small number pass in up to six subjects. Good successes have been achieved in English and science and outstanding results in art, where last year two students achieved A grades and one received an A*. Achievement, however, is not solely within the classroom. Amongst their many other successes students pass NVQ building and a variety of sporting awards. These include many students achieving Royal Yachting Association (RYA) Level 2, a unique achievement in a school setting. Students' achievements demonstrate good progress overall. There is not, however, sufficient rigour in the tracking of progress for the centre to have an accurate ongoing record of how well students are doing in all subjects.

Students make excellent progress in their personal development. Almost all make considerable improvements in their attendance, and although the impact of a few poor attendees and students missing lessons for medical reasons reduces overall figures, they still compare very favourably with similar establishments. Students make significant improvement in their behaviour and are enthusiastic learners. This results in all of the bases used by the centre being calm, relaxed environments. It is also reflected in students' ability to access offsite facilities such as the Olympic Sailing academy where they mingle very well with adults, including Olympic gold medallists. This improvement in behaviour is linked to students' increased understanding of how they should behave in different situations. Achieving the balance of students still being themselves yet learning what is expected of them is a key objective of the centre's work. This is very well documented in a 'rights and responsibilities' charter developed by staff and students and there is good evidence that this objective is achieved. Hence, students accept the expectations of the centre through adopting principles of statements such as 'I have the right to have a mobile and the responsibility to use it appropriately'.

'There is no bullying here,' reported a Year 11 student. In many ways, this is a remarkable achievement given the mix of students. In reality, all students relate very well to each other and all contribute to the excellent relationships there are throughout the centre. It is a harmonious community and all feel safe there. Students' very positive personal development is a contributory factor to the excellent record of their destinations when reaching school leaving age. For example, last year all but 3% moved on to training, employment or further education, demonstrating how well students acquire relevant work and life skills.

The quality of care and support students receive is good. 'There's always someone to talk to if you have a problem!', exclaimed one student in expressing her appreciation of the quality of care shown by staff. This is echoed by parents and carers, as well as visiting staff from other professional agencies. These good links, which include the youth offending team, Connexions and the mental health team, are further very positive features of the centre's provision. Students have a strong voice in contributing to changes in the centre and there are many examples of suggestions they have made which have been followed up by staff. The impact of guidance given to students about their academic progress is reduced by inconsistencies in the quality of marking. There are examples of students' work being unmarked and too few comments made as to what level the work is and what they need to do to improve.

Overall teaching and learning are effective and enable students to achieve well. Good resources, excellent displays of students' work and well structured lessons together with the excellent relationships staff have with students are consistently strong aspects of teaching throughout the centre. All of these factors are effective in motivating students and helping them to learn. Excellent links with medical staff further enhance learning in the hospital teaching base. On occasions, however, progress is slower because what students are expected to learn is not made specifically clear in the lesson planning. This is not always the case; for example in English where the learning objectives for the lesson are made clear in the planning, students make better progress.

An overriding strong feature of the centre is the excellent curriculum, which undoubtedly plays a key role in students' outstanding progress in their personal development and in their good academic achievement. The centre recognises the importance of a core curriculum that develops students' basic skills and provides opportunities to achieve. Work to support students' social and emotional well-being is extremely well planned and very effective. In addition, the centre knows that many students have previously become disinterested in learning. It therefore adopts a flexible individual approach that seeks to develop each student's willingness to engage in learning through focusing on their interests. Opportunities to engage in off-site practical activities are excellent. For example, students service and maintain, as well as ride motorbikes. They are also involved in go-cart racing, the centre's team currently being through to the semi-finals of the national championships. Students' enthusiastic participation in a wide range of physical activities demonstrates their very strong awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

Leadership and management of the centre are good. The headteacher shows a very strong determination to take whatever action is necessary to meet the wide-ranging needs of students. His determination is clearly illustrated by the many innovations he has made not only to the curriculum but also to the premises. An example of this is the recent creation of a communal refreshment area, known as 'the Hub'. His entrepreneurial skills have also been shown in acquiring the materials to create an outside decking area for students. The leadership and management of each base are effective in ensuring that the quality of the centre's work is consistently good at each base. However, other senior staff are still developing their skills in the formal monitoring of teachers' lesson plans, students' progress records and the marking of their work. Although this monitoring has accurately identified some inconsistencies at each base, the centre acknowledges that procedures are not always sufficiently rigorous to provide a really sharp focus on all improvement needs.

The headteacher has ensured that the centre is a key member of the local partnership of schools and this results in students being able to take advantage of many of the resources available to mainstream students. These links with other schools and local facilities ensure that the centre

is an integral part of the local community. Work designed to enhance students' cultural and spiritual development also ensures students have a good awareness of the wider world.

What the school should do to improve further

- Establish more effective systems for tracking the progress of students and more consistency in marking, so that students have clear guidance on how to improve.
- Ensure lesson planning always makes it clear what students are expected to learn.
- Develop more rigorous procedures to monitor all aspects of the centre's work.

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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 capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
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?	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	1
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	1

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?	1
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	2
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**

7 February 2009

Dear Students,

Inspection of Dorchester Learning Centre, Dorchester, DT2 9PS

Both my colleague and I very much enjoyed our visit to the centre recently. You all made us very welcome, especially those of you who prepared the excellent soup and muffins we had for lunch.

Our report judges your centre to be good with outstanding features. We think the staff, led by your excellent headteacher, care for you very well. They go to great lengths to provide you with excellent learning opportunities and activities. Because of this we think you achieve well and make outstanding progress with your personal development, especially improving your attendance and behaviour. We think teaching is effective and helping you do well in examinations. The results in art last year were particularly impressive. There are, though, a few aspects that we think the centre can improve in what it does.

These include the following:

- Develop better systems to see how well you are doing and make sure that marking of your work shows you how to improve
- Make sure teachers, when they plan your lessons, always make it clear to you what they expect you to learn
- Make sure all aspects of the centre's work are monitored to ensure they are of a consistent quality throughout the centre

We are confident you'll continue to enjoy being at the centre and keep achieving well. Good luck to those of you in the go-cart team in the national finals.

Best wishes

Yours faithfully

Charles Hackett Lead inspector