

The Links Education Support Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	130356
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	328526
Inspection dates	13–14 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Alan Lemon

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)	53
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Headteacher	Miss Tracey Healy
Date of previous school inspection	25 January 2006
School address	Woollam Crescent St. Albans Hertfordshire AL3 5RP
Telephone number	01727836102
Fax number	01727855002

Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The Links educates and supports students who have been permanently excluded, are at risk of exclusion or facing other challenges such as poor attendance, behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Most students enter The Links with attainment well below that expected for their age as a result of learning difficulties and/or disabilities and absence from school. The centre also supports nurseries, primary and secondary schools, in providing help to those pupils on their rolls who have more difficulty than most with school or learning.

A substantial amount of change has occurred since the school was last inspected. It has moved to new premises and is now on two sites. The sites are a Key Stage 3 centre on Woollam Crescent and a Key Stage 4 centre on the campus of Oaklands College, a further education college in St Albans. The number on roll has risen significantly, as has the number of staff employed. Provision is full time, mainly for permanently excluded students and those at risk of exclusion. It is part time for students identified as being vulnerable who still spend part of the week in their own schools. Currently, one student has a statement of special educational need.

The school gained the Careers Education Guidance Quality award in October 2006 and has the Healthy Schools award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

The Links is an outstanding school as it is extremely effective in all that it does to support students, their families and mainstream schools. This is the result of exceptional leadership and that of the headteacher in particular. She has a deep understanding of what it takes to make a difference to students and schools contending with behavioural and other difficulties. The impact of The Links' work is enormous on reducing permanent exclusions, eliminating the risk of exclusion, returning excluded students to schools and supporting vulnerable students. Outreach work in schools is especially effective in helping to avoid exclusions. Data shows 75% of students referred need no further support after the first intervention by the outreach team and that any additional support provided continues to drive down exclusion figures. This success is due to the excellent partnership with schools that has brought huge improvement in co-ordinating and responding to students at risk. Very effective support is put into schools and schools are helped to be very effective in supporting their students through The Links training programmes. Many headteachers have written eloquently and appreciatively of the work and effectiveness of The Links staff in helping them succeed with their most challenging students. The headteacher of The Links has a very good knowledge and understanding of the networks of community support surrounding students and their families. She has dedicated much of her time to leading and working within these networks, for example, on the Inclusion Panel, the headteacher's group and the multi-agency group which ensures network resources and expertise maintain a sharp focus on meeting students' needs. Parents have expressed much support for the work of the school. This engagement with the community plays a significant part in bringing its parts closer together and makes an excellent contribution to community cohesion.

Care, guidance and support are outstanding because staff are expert and systematic in helping students to understand their difficulties, deal with them effectively and decide on positive directions for the future. Safeguarding requirements are met and the high profile of child protection procedures ensures students have all the support they need. A great deal of information is gathered on each student from the outset and their schools respond well to requests. Staff know students well and, with skill, form positive relationships which act to reassure students and build their confidence. This leads to outstanding personal development, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Students are concerned to succeed and are quick to see the usefulness of attending school and making the effort to achieve. A sharp eye is kept on students' attendance and punctuality and, because they also begin to enjoy school, these improve dramatically. Behaviour really improves and is excellent, particularly as most students are enabled to return to school successfully. Being very alert to the possibility of bullying, the school is very effective in eliminating it and is particularly robust in monitoring and dealing with any racist incidents. However, students are strongly influenced by the school's positive ethos and show regard and respect for others. They are similarly influenced to consider and take onboard the school's strong promotion of a healthy lifestyle and staying safe.

Students achieve exceedingly well, often making very rapid progress because of increased self-confidence and renewed interest in learning. Teaching is outstanding for its ability to engage and interest students and encourage them to work hard and persevere. Much has been improved by leaders observing lessons and ensuring lesson planning is sharply focused and activities are challenging and enjoyable. The curriculum provides a comprehensive variety of work and activities. These meet the needs of the different groups of students very effectively.

More often than not lessons are planned systematically. In some lessons learning objectives are not always directly linked with the very good information the school holds on students' attainment. A thorough initial assessment informs teaching of the appropriate starting point for each student. As students' length of stay in the school varies so considerably, the means used to track their progress is not fine enough to measure small gains made over short periods of time. As a result, the school does not have a thoroughly detailed understanding of its impact on students' academic progress.

What the school should do to improve further

- Develop assessment and the tracking of students' progress in order to measure accurately small gains in attainment over a half term period.
- Ensure that in the planning of every lesson, learning objectives are closely linked to assessment information showing the next steps in what students are yet to attain.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Students make good progress in lessons, and where teaching is really engaging, the rate of progress is both rapid and outstanding in both centres. This is all reflected in the assessment information collected by the school. This shows the large majority of students make enough progress to raise the standard of their English, mathematics and science at the expected rate. Frequently, students make faster progress than this which has a remarkable impact on improving standards. Their achievement is outstanding as it is set against a background of learning difficulties, disrupted education and, in some cases, not having spent a significant amount of time attending The Links. Standards are much lower than expected because of this, although they are being raised. Science in particular stands out because it is taught so effectively. GCSE results in 2008 were impressive and were achieved because the five students gaining A* to E passes persevered with the science coursework demands. As students are returning to mainstream school increasingly more quickly, they do not have the time to meet GCSE requirements. The alternative of adult literacy and numeracy courses, recently introduced, are beginning to show similar success and achievement, especially in mathematics where already one Year 10 student has gained Level 1 and two Year 11 students Level 2.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students' attendance and behaviour improve significantly as a result of strong, sharply focused support and good relationships with staff at The Links two centres. Newly arrived students settle quickly as they are reassured by staff and made to feel safe. Exclusions from The Links and from the schools it supports have decreased remarkably since the last inspection. Successful return to schools by students who were excluded or at risk of exclusion have increased substantially. The code of conduct is their own policy and risk assessments made by staff are shared with them. All of this helps students develop their attachment to the school's ethos and the motivation to meet its high expectations. This engagement builds self-confidence and, together with help on anger management, conflict resolution, and relationships, students are friendly with each other and staff and have respect for each other's differences. Students are all influenced very positively by the close attention given in the curriculum to healthy lifestyle and staying safe. They enjoy school because they see a real purpose in it for them and they gain a clear sense of direction for the future. This is reflected in the fact that the Year 11

students leaving The Links go onto college or into employment. Students contribute enthusiastically in school and in many ways to the community by raising money for charity, improving gardens and playgrounds and helping with reading in primary schools.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Teachers and their assistants at both centres possess a broad and extensive range of experience and expertise which they use very skilfully to build relationships with students. The encouragement students gain from this means they willingly take part in lessons and learn extremely effectively. The very good behaviour management strategies used by staff help students to behave extremely well and co-operate in lessons. They settle into tasks very well and make good efforts with their work. Teachers and assistants are excellent at building up students' confidence in dealing with challenges and as a consequence, their skills in working improve considerably, contributing significantly to students' capability of returning to a mainstream school setting. Teaching is planned very effectively in nearly all respects, although occasionally, lesson objectives for students do not always take full account of the very good information the school holds on their attainment. Assessment overall is very thorough and effective in establishing each student's attainment and tracking their long term progress. However, the length of stay in school varies considerably among students and the means to measure the undoubted impact of the school's work on their progress, over a short period of time, is not yet refined enough. The assessment criteria attached to accredited courses is used extremely well, particularly in science, to keep students informed of progress and the next steps in their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum makes a comprehensive response to the wide range of students' circumstances and learning needs. A very broad programme of work and activities is provided to suit students who are permanently excluded, at risk of exclusion, vulnerable or out of school for other reasons. There is a breadth of academic, practical and vocational work to suit the needs of Key Stage 3 and 4 students including college courses, work experience and accredited courses.

The exceptionally strong relationship with schools means The Links has a full appreciation of the programmes they and their students require. The detailed planning in relation to this means students' work and activities are sharply focused on them achieving academically, in personal development and in their capacity to return to school successfully or leave very well prepared for the future.

The work carried out with students in their schools by The Links outreach team is exceptionally well developed. The impact is seen in the large majority of students supported staying in school and not needing further help after the first referral. It provides a large variety of programmes for tackling the academic and personal areas which these students have most difficulty. The team's work on supporting students' move between primary and secondary school is of particular note and has resulted in the publication of the programme.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Care, guidance and support is superb because The Links has developed partnerships with, and largely co-ordinates the work of, a wide network of agencies and resources involved with students, their families and schools. This includes the contribution of its own very effective outreach team. As a result, students find coherence and consistency in the support coming from many sources. This contributes to them feeling encouraged, being valued and gaining a sense of direction. Staff resolutely seek out every avenue of support and guidance. Students required to do community service as a result of offending are helped to complete this and gain a sense of achievement from it. The wealth of activities provided by staff and many agencies in both centres ensure students acquire awareness of, and concern for, their own health and safety. Advice and guidance on academic progress and personal development is readily accepted by students which means they pick good pathways by returning to school, avoiding exclusion or following a well-planned career route.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

The enormous improvement in The Links since its last inspection is the result of the headteacher's very strong leadership. It is also due to the strength of the senior leadership team and the management committee both of which have improved very considerably. This has given the school an outstanding capacity for improvement. The headteacher's exceptional vision and understanding of the complex task of supporting students, their families and schools has led to a substantial and very successful expansion of provision. This now has better accommodation using two new sites, a greatly increased roll, many additional staff, strengthened partnerships and many more staff engaged in leadership and management. Change has been managed exceptionally well with the result that The Links enjoys a very high reputation among the schools it serves and the power of its outreach support has much to do with this. Parents are very appreciative of the support they receive and impressed by the results achieved by their children.

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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?	1
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?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Achievement and standards

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

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	1
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?	1
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?	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
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**

15 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of The Links Education Support Centre, St Albans AL3 6EJ

We thoroughly enjoyed our visit to the centres at Woollham Crescent and Oaklands College, particularly because of your warm welcome and friendliness. We want to say thank you for the thoughtful comments made by those students we managed to talk to during our visiting.

I agree completely with your headteacher that you have an outstanding school. Its excellent education and support is a huge help to your progress, getting back to school and being prepared for the future. This is just the break you need and you, I am very glad to say, take full advantage of it. Your behaviour is excellent, which ensures you stay safe and it also enables you to go back to school. I was impressed by how hard you work in lessons. You are passing examinations, gaining qualifications and achieving much more than perhaps you and many more would have expected. It was really obvious that you enjoy attending school and are keen to contribute. Raising money for charities is something you can be proud of. Two things that really stand out about your school are the many different courses and activities available to you and the excellent support your teachers and others give to you. This is especially so with regard to teaching about a healthy lifestyle and I think you are treating this seriously.

Your headteacher and all of her staff have been outstanding in improving your school. They have made it a great deal more effective in helping you succeed than was the case when your school was last inspected. I have asked your headteacher to do two small things to improve already excellent teaching. These are to measure the progress you are making in lessons more closely and to use the information on your progress to plan your work even more precisely. If this succeeds it will speed up your rate of progress even more.

I wish you all the best in the future.

Alan Lemon

Lead inspector