

# Birch Wood School

## Inspection report

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Unique Reference Number	134640
Local Authority	Leicestershire
Inspection number	328942
Inspection dates	13–14 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Helen Barter

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.

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Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	5–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	96
Sixth form	13
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Dr Matthew O'Callaghan
Headteacher	Mrs Kate Waplinton
Date of previous school inspection	10 July 2006
School address	Grange Drive Melton Mowbray Leicestershire LE13 1HA
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## Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 13 lessons, and held meetings with governors, staff, members of the school council and parents. They observed the school's work, and looked at the school improvement plan, school policies, assessment information and documents relating to pupils' safety and welfare. In addition, 47 parent questionnaires were received and analysed.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- the progress made by different groups of pupils
- the quality of pupils' personal development, including their behaviour
- how well the school fulfils its duty to promote community cohesion
- the effectiveness of leaders and managers in driving school improvement.

## Information about the school

Birch Wood School was formed in 2004 as a result of the amalgamation of two special schools. It serves Melton Mowbray and the surrounding area. Pupils have difficulties that include moderate and severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders and challenging behaviours. Most pupils are of White British heritage. Of the small number from minority ethnic backgrounds, very few speak English as an additional language. There are small numbers of looked after children in most year groups. The school currently provides for a very small number of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage, although this is not a usual part of its provision.

## Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

2

### Main findings

Birch Wood is a good school. In its first five years, the leadership team have successfully brought the staff, pupils and parents together into one cohesive and effective team. Parents and carers are delighted with the school's high quality relationships with them, typically saying, 'We have nothing but praise for Birch Wood School and its staff.' The key factors in the school's effectiveness are:

- pupils make good individual progress, particularly in learning the basic skills of communication and literacy
- the positive ethos, which helps pupils to grow in independence, learn to behave extremely well and make an excellent contribution to their community
- teachers' use of a good range of strategies, which make learning interesting and helps all pupils to achieve well against their individual targets
- the outstanding curriculum and the wide range of excellent learning opportunities during and beyond the school day
- the outstanding care, guidance and support, which has a significant impact on pupils' personal development and adds to their enjoyment of school
- leaders' and managers' outstanding emphasis on ensuring that pupils are safe and equally valued
- the headteacher's outstanding dedication and drive to make Birch Wood the very best is shared by all in the school community.

The school's leadership team have a good record of taking action to make improvements which demonstrates their good capacity for sustaining improvement. Their evaluation procedures provide an accurate appraisal of what has already been achieved and where further attention is required. For example, they have successfully risen to the challenge of making good provision for the Early Years Foundation Stage, for the first time in the school's short history. They have also strengthened the curriculum, through improving the provision for information and communication technology (ICT) and developing staff expertise, which has improved pupils' communication skills. The school's aspirations to raise pupils' achievements further by strengthening the use of the new assessment system across the school, and its recognition that it needs to make even greater strides to promote community cohesion, demonstrate the school's awareness of what it needs to plan for the school's future improvement.

## What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Enable all pupils to achieve their targets at a consistently high level by:
  - making better use of the school's assessment system to regularly analyse their progress
  - using the resulting information to adjust lesson plans and learning activities to better match all pupils' needs.
- Increase the effectiveness of strategies to promote community cohesion and their impact by:
  - developing a systematic process for senior leaders and governors to monitor and evaluate the impact of the school's work on outcomes.

## Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2
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At the heart of pupils' good achievement is their enjoyment of learning and the support they receive, helping them make significant gains in their personal development. Not only is pupils' enjoyment of school shown in their good attendance, but also in their cheery greetings to the headteacher and staff as they arrive each morning.

Pupils experience a real sense of pleasure when a new skill is mastered, such as starting to take independent steps, learning to use a knife and fork or overcoming shyness to present a 'piece to camera' on the week's weather forecast. The excellent work done to help pupils improve their communication skills means that pupils use signs, symbols and technology to engage in learning and to communicate their responses. Pupils are motivated to learn because activities are practical, relevant to their age and ability and are fun. They are helped to overcome individual behaviour difficulties, which can inhibit their learning. They are encouraged to try new experiences, such as tasting jelly from a spoon or helping to overcome their fears when getting their faces wet in the hydrotherapy pool.

Although pupils' attainment is low, because of their learning difficulties, pupils make good progress from their starting points. There is no apparent difference between the different groups in the school population, including those in the care of the local authority. The school knows its pupils well and uses individual tracking sheets to set targets for improvement. School data shows that most, but not all, pupils meet or exceed these targets. The best progress is made in pupils' communication, personal and literacy skills. As a result of investment in good quality resources, pupils' learning in ICT is good. The school identified that its original system for whole-school assessment was resulting in some inaccuracies, particularly in pupils' skills in physical education. The new system is helping staff to be more involved in assessing pupils' progress, although the school is not yet able to demonstrate fully its impact in raising pupils' achievement.

Other key features of pupil outcomes are that:

- pupils have an excellent understanding of how to keep themselves safe and know exactly whom to turn to, if they have worries and concerns
- pupils' behaviour has improved since the last inspection and is now outstanding
- pupils are highly committed to leading fit and healthy lives. They are enthusiastic participants in sports and greatly enjoy the healthy school meals
- pupils make an excellent contribution to their school community, such as taking responsibility for weeding flower beds and making sure that everybody contributes their views to decisions made by the school council
- pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are good. They have a well-developed empathy and understanding for others and make a significant contribution to the school's very positive atmosphere.

*These are the grades for pupils' outcomes*

Pupils' attainment <sup>1</sup>	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 <sup>1</sup>	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?	2

## How effective is the provision?

The great majority of teaching is good and there is some that is outstanding. Exceptional practice is seen where teachers use their expertise to plan activities which are exactly matched to individual pupils' needs and inspire enthusiasm for learning. High expectations, imaginative tasks and excellent questioning are instrumental in extending pupils' learning. For example, in a literacy lesson, pupils made good progress through playing the different characters in a puppet play. Skilful instruction by the teacher and excellent support from the teaching assistants meant all the pupils, including those new to the school, were fully involved in the story, listened carefully to others and played their parts enthusiastically in the performance.

<sup>1</sup> The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

Other features of teaching commonly observed during the inspection include:

- teachers planning lessons carefully and making effective use of pictures, objects and sounds to encourage pupils' choice and to support their learning
- exceptionally good management of behaviour, creating a calm and purposeful learning environment
- the strong teamwork between teachers and support staff and their high level of understanding of pupils' disabilities, learning difficulties and individual needs
- the consistent focus on supporting pupils' learning and progress, while at the same time ensuring pupils are safe, comfortable and well cared for
- teachers' inconsistent approach to sharing the lesson's objectives with the pupils and reviewing what they have learned at the end
- planned activities not always offering the highest level of challenge to the most able pupils in the group.

The school's focus on linking subjects together has paid dividends in improving the quality of its curriculum. Pupils' learning in the classroom is often followed up with practical activities, which add extra enrichment to their experiences. For example, having learned to read features on a map, pupils are looking forward to practising their skills during a residential visit to Shropshire. Pupils' achievement benefits very well from the time and energy given by staff in providing an extensive programme of activities, visits and residential trips. The curriculum successfully sets out to enable all pupils to develop confidence and responsibility and to extend their knowledge and understanding of the world. In response to pupils' needs and to raise expectations for learning, the school now offers a greater range of accreditation, enterprise and work experience for pupils in Years 10 and 11.

The care, guidance and support offered to pupils are first class and are highly appreciated. The staff's knowledge about pupils' individual conditions and difficulties is considerable and the onsite medical expertise and support is very good. Pupils are encouraged and enabled to share their views, particularly when decisions are being made about their future. The development of communication passports by staff and families has been a resounding success in ensuring that everybody knows about a pupil's individual needs, cares for them with dignity and supports their learning.

*These are the grades for the quality of provision*

The quality of teaching	2
The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

## How effective are leadership and management?

Leaders and managers are dedicated in their pursuit of excellence at Birch Wood. The headteacher has worked steadfastly to stabilise the school, driving forward

improvements while securing the whole-hearted support of the school community. She is a strong leader and, with her senior leadership team, inspires others to work effectively in driving initiatives for the school's future development. Their work to promote equality of opportunity and eliminate discrimination has produced excellent results. The involvement of subject managers is much improved since the previous inspection, with a greater role being played by them in monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision across all key stages. The school is reflective about its practice and regularly seeks the views of parents and others to ensure that it is on the right track and not losing sight of what works well and what needs to be improved. The introduction of a new system for reviewing pupil progress was undertaken following substantial discussions with staff and concerns about accuracy of previous assessments. It demonstrates that the school is not complacent and is prepared to change its practice to ensure that pupils' achievement is consistently outstanding.

Governors are actively involved in the life of the school. While being supportive, they ask challenging questions about pupil performance and budget decisions. They are effective in supporting the school to develop its already productive relationships with other local schools and colleges. They ensure that the school meets its statutory duties and recognise that the next step is to monitor and evaluate the school's effectiveness in promoting community cohesion. At the time of the inspection, the school had rigorous and highly effective systems in place to keep pupils safe.

*These are the grades for leadership and management*

The effectiveness of leadership and management in communicating ambition and driving improvement	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

## Early Years Foundation Stage

The staff's good planning and understanding of the learning needs of the school's youngest pupils ensures that provision for the Early Years Foundation Stage is good, enabling children to make good progress. High priority is given to ensuring that all are safe and well cared for. Well-established routines, along with nurturing relationships, help children to settle at school and to develop interest in learning. The outdoor environment is used well, although activities are not specifically planned to reinforce learning taking place in the classroom, for example by extending the



exploration of square shapes through outdoor play. Leadership and management are satisfactory, ensuring that the statutory requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage are met. The school's current system for observing and assessing pupil progress has only recently been refined to match the needs of the youngest children. Staff recognise the need to seek additional advice about Early Years Foundation Stage assessment to support them in this new area of their work.

Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management in the Early Years Foundation Stage	3
Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	3

## Sixth form

The most able pupils usually leave the school at 16 to go to local colleges. There is good provision for those staying on and it continues to develop as the needs of students become more complex. There are more opportunities for students to be taught in a distinct group than at the time of the previous inspection, such as in the communication group, although there is still not a strong sixth form identity within the school. Where students are taught with pupils from Years 10 and 11, the work is suitably matched to their needs and, in some groups, offers a degree of challenge for a few who are capable of achieving higher levels of accreditation. Students make good progress because of good quality teaching. All students gain awards through ASDAN, an awarding body which provides programmes and qualifications to develop key skills and life skills, and about half gain City & Guilds entry level certificates in literacy and numeracy. All undertake supported work experience placements, with a few successfully achieving these independently. Links are already established with the local college, although leaders and managers have identified the need to pursue further opportunities for students as the 14 to 19 curriculum develops. The care and support for students are outstanding and result in their excellent behaviour and continuing positive attitudes to school life. Students receive good guidance on the next steps to take, with the result that all transfer to further education or training.

Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2
Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2

## Views of parents and carers

Parents are overwhelmingly positive about Birch Wood. They particularly value the quality of communication, which really helps them to know how well their children

are doing and whether they are safe and cared for properly. They are delighted that their children are happy at school and say what a 'great job' the staff do because they 'are always positive and the results are clearly noticeable'. As one said, 'they should all get a medal'. The positive comments far outweighed any which were negative. Individual concerns focused on the provision of homework, challenge for the more able, more opportunities for integration with the mainstream schools on the campus and greater staff awareness of pupils' progress as they move up through the school. As this report shows, inspectors firmly agree with parents' positive views. The concern about the need for better awareness of pupils' progress is also supported by the inspection findings.

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Birch Wood to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school. If a parent has more than one child at the school, we ask them to record an answer against all the questions, for each of their children.

The inspection team received 47 completed questionnaires. In total, there are 111 parents and carers registered at the school.

	Always	Most of the time	Occasionally	Never
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	38	9	0	0

## 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:** the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, training or development. This may refer to the acquisition of skills, knowledge, understanding or desired attributes. Attributes include qualities or personal competencies which are important to the development of the pupil; for example personal, social, cultural, emotional or health.
- 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.



15 May 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Birch Wood School, Melton Mowbray LE13 1HA

Thank you for helping me when I came to visit. I enjoyed meeting you. Thank you for being friendly and talking to me about your school. The inspectors think that Birch Wood is a good school.

These are some of the best things I found.

- You are happy at school. You behave very well and are kind to each other.
- Teachers help you to learn well and so you do well at school.
- Everybody cares about you very much and makes sure you are safe.
- You know how to keep healthy. It's great that you enjoy sport and know you should eat healthy food.
- Adults do a great job in helping you learn how to say what you think and feel.
- You really like all the activities, clubs and visits. These help your learning too.
- The headteacher and all the staff really want you to do as well as you can.
- They work very hard to make sure that Birch Wood is the best it can be.

There are two things that I have asked the school to improve. These are to:

- make sure the staff check regularly that you are doing your very best
- do as much as they can to work with the community.

I am sure that you will help them by always working hard, behaving well and doing your best. Good luck with your 'Oliver' show. It was great hearing you sing 'Food, Glorious Food' when you were on your way to dinner!

Yours faithfully

Helen Barter  
Lead inspector

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