

The Link Education Centre, Taunton

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	134699
Local Authority	Somerset
Inspection number	328953
Inspection date	23 October 2008
Reporting inspector	Michael Megee

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	5–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	27
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Headteacher	Linda Miles
Date of previous school inspection	24 November 2005
School address	Congregational Church Offices North Street Taunton TA1 1LW
Telephone number	01823 283798
Fax number	01823 283798

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

The Link Education Centre provides education for pupils with either physical or mental health difficulties that prevent them from attending school. As a result of these difficulties, pupils attainment is exceptionally low. The centre aims to reintegrate pupils back into their schools or on to college as soon as is practicable. Pupils are taught in a number of different settings. They may be taught as part of a group in the centre itself or in a local library where this is felt to be more appropriate. If pupils are unable to attend the centre, they receive individual tuition, usually at home. In addition, these pupils are able to take part in interactive lessons through internet links with the centre. The centre also provides outreach support to pupils in their own schools.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The Link Education Centre provides a satisfactory standard of education, while effectively supporting its pupils through a very difficult period of their lives, to be successful in their personal development. Parents really appreciate what the centre does for their children. As one typically wrote, 'I have nothing but praise for all the staff. My child's life has been turned around. This place was definitely the answer.'

Pupils' academic achievement is satisfactory. Pupils do well when taking examinations in the core subjects and gain a reasonable number of passes in GCSE examinations. For most pupils, the centre achieves its aim of returning pupils quickly to mainstream schools or on to college. Teaching is satisfactory and characterised by strong relationships and mutual respect within the classroom. Teachers working in the pupils' homes are skilful in helping individual pupils to resume their learning. When working with groups in the centre, teachers do not always match the activities or teaching strategies to the needs and capabilities of all the pupils.

Although the centre provides a satisfactory education overall, the curriculum is inadequate. The teaching accommodation is very poor and pupils may receive too few teaching hours. When pupils first join the centre, their difficulties often mean that they find it difficult to maintain concentration for any length of time and most require a gentle introduction to a full timetable. However, pupils, parents and staff agree that, after this initial period, there are pupils who could manage and would benefit from more lessons than they currently receive. The quality of the accommodation also restricts what is offered to the pupils. The centre is based in an inaccessible, run-down, shabby building with few specialist teaching areas. The leadership team and staff try hard to provide the pupils with what they need but under the current arrangements, not all pupils have the best opportunities to achieve well other than in the core subjects. The service was due to be relocated to new premises, but this has been delayed until next year.

The centre has a good success rate in returning pupils back to mainstream school or on to college. This is because of the good support and guidance provided by the centre, working in tandem with parents as well as the other agencies. Together, they set pupils quickly on the road to recovering their self-esteem and energy, and their personal qualities once again flourish.

Leadership and management of the centre are satisfactory. The centre works well in partnership with other agencies, such as Connexions and social services, to the benefit of the pupils. It also fosters good relationships with the schools in the area it serves. The head of centre provides clear direction and is introducing systems and procedures, such as those for tracking pupils' progress, which will enable the centre to identify and remedy any underachievement more accurately. Not all the systems are yet fully effective and the centre's current view of its own effectiveness is pitched too high. The centre's track record of sound academic achievement and good personal development demonstrates that the centre has satisfactory capacity to improve, especially with the planned move to much improved accommodation.

What the school should do to improve further

- Make sure that all pupils receive a sufficient number of teaching hours.
- Increase the breadth of the curriculum so that it meets the needs of all the pupils.
- Ensure that teachers match activities effectively to the capabilities and needs of the pupils.

A small proportion of schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Pupils arrive at the centre often having missed large chunks of their schooling and because of this many lack confidence and resilience. The centre does well in bringing pupils out of themselves by gaining their trust, and by concentrating hard on the essential basic skills they require to get back into their schools. Most pupils achieve well against their individual targets, and the majority of pupils return successfully and quickly to their own schools to resume their education. Pupils in Year 11 who attend the centre attain creditable results in GCSE examinations, albeit in a narrow range of subjects. Achievement in mathematics and science is stronger than that in English and information and communication technology (ICT), where subject leaders are relatively new to their posts and still finding their feet. However, achievement is restricted by the amount of teaching time available, which for some pupils is too limited, and by the unsatisfactory accommodation. For those pupils well on the road to recovery, the curriculum is too narrow, and so they are not able to achieve as well as they might in, for example, art, music or physical education.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils say how swiftly their self-esteem recovers once they begin learning again, and say that the key to their recovery is the way in which staff quickly establish a good relationship with them. As one pupil said, 'I lost all my confidence and I wouldn't have got it back if I hadn't come here.' Attendance improves and is good in the context of their health difficulties. Pupils who attend the centre say how much they like coming along and wish they could have more time there so that they could regularly learn, for example, cookery. One parent told how her son would ride his bike five miles to and from the centre each day, even through mud and rain, and always get there early so he could have as much time as possible. The personal, social and health education programme gives pupils a good insight into how to make healthy and safe choices in their lives, although the restricted accommodation means they have few opportunities to undertake regular hard exercise. Pupils develop responsibility and participate well in their local community through, for example, fund raising for local charities. Pupils are tremendously polite and helpful, and talk very respectfully about their teachers. Behaviour is outstandingly good. Pupils achieve a good range of the basic skills, both personal and academic, that they require to move back smoothly into school or on to college.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teachers have very good relationships with pupils whether at home or in the centre. They set out their lesson objectives clearly and most make good use of the interactive whiteboards. If pupils require teaching at home, staff operate very flexibly, recognising quickly if pupils are not well enough to undertake long lessons and rescheduling them if necessary. Parents are very grateful for this sensitivity. When teaching groups of pupils, staff are not yet fully effective

in making sure that every pupil in the group receives the right level of work and that the most effective strategies are used for each individual. There is sound teamwork between teachers and teaching assistants.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 4

The centre has a satisfactory curriculum for the core subjects and this leads to positive outcomes for the pupils. However, teaching time is too low, especially for those pupils who are well on the way to full recovery. This means that the range of subjects on offer for such pupils is too narrow. The centre provides a morning of enrichment activities each week to give pupils a taste of other subjects, often through educational visits, but there is too little depth or regularity to the activities to result in high achievement for the more capable pupils. The quality of the curriculum is further compromised by the very poor accommodation. The building is shabby and in a state of disrepair. The centre can only be reached through climbing several flights of stairs. It is therefore virtually inaccessible for pupils, parents or staff with walking difficulties. Inside, the staff have done their best to provide one pleasant teaching room but there is little by way of specialist teaching accommodation. The local authority plans to move the centre to other purpose-built accommodation in Taunton next year, although this has been subject to delays.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Staff at the centre work together well with other agencies to provide strong, individualised pastoral support to the pupils and their families. One parent said, 'This place has been a godsend to us – a real lifeline.' Parents are very positive about the quality of the interactions they have with staff, and say they feel fully included in the decision-making about their child's future. Staff are well trained so that there is very good supervision of pupils to look after their emotional needs and to keep them safe. A key person is identified for each pupil and pupils say that they are happy to talk with them about personal issues and problems. Staff give constant feedback and encouragement to pupils about their progress, both during lessons and in writing, although one or two pupils do not know what their individual targets are.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The head of centre provides strong, hands-on leadership to staff at the centre and is supported effectively by both her deputy and line manager. They work very hard and flexibly to make the best out of their limited resources and to compensate for the shortfall in staffing and the shortcomings in the accommodation. Parents value the frequent contact they have with senior staff. One parent said, 'I really appreciate that the headteacher attends reviews and comes round the house to see how we're all doing.' Many key management systems, such as development planning and performance management, are now in place. Although the centre's view of its own effectiveness is over-generous, there is a sound understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in most areas that is used to make improvements where necessary. The head of centre has recently introduced an effective system for tracking the performance of pupils who attend the centre, but this has not yet been extended to include the other pupils on roll. Until this is in place, the centre will not have a complete picture of its own effectiveness or

how well all the pupils are achieving. The centre promotes community cohesion satisfactorily given the constraints under which it works, and the difficulties faced by the youngsters. Subject leadership is satisfactory but improving as those new to the centre continue to develop the necessary skills. The management committee is operating satisfactorily and providing adequate support during a period of reorganisation by the local authority.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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?	3
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	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3

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	3
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	1
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?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	4
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?	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
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

24 October 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of the Link Education Centre, Taunton, TA1 1LW

You may remember that I came to visit your centre recently to find out how well you are all doing. Thank you very much for the welcome you gave me, and please thank those parents who came in specially to talk to me or who filled out the questionnaires. My thanks also goes to those pupils who came to talk to me and told me all about the centre. I was very impressed by how confidently you answered my questions.

This is what I found during the inspection.

- Teachers do a satisfactory job in lessons and you make sound progress in your studies.
- The centre staff give you good individual support and guidance, so your personal development is good.
- Your behaviour is outstanding.
- The curriculum is not good enough because those of you who have begun to recover do not have as many hours of teaching as you need.
- The leadership team operates satisfactorily and makes the centre run smoothly.

I have asked the centre staff to do the following three things to provide you with an even better service.

- Increase the number of teaching hours for some of you.
- Put more subjects on the timetable to give you a broader curriculum.
- Make sure that each one of you has the right level of work in every lesson.

It was a pleasure to meet you.

Every best wish for the future.

Yours sincerely

Mick Megee Lead inspector