

Polam Oaks with Little Acorns Nursery School

Independent school inspection report

DCSF registration number 820/6000
Unique reference number 109720
URN for registered childcare and social care EY 311212
Inspection number 334276
Inspection dates 13-14 October 2009
Reporting inspector Jane Melbourne HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended. The inspection of childcare was conducted under Section 49(2) of the Childcare Act 2006.

Age group: 18 months – 9

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.¹

The inspection of registered provision² was conducted under Section 49(2) of the Childcare Act 2006.³

Information about the school

Polam School was founded in 1923. It was last inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate in November 2006 and its Early Years Foundation Stage was inspected by Ofsted in June 2008. The school was acquired by the Cognita Group of Schools in 2004. It is located in Bedford and merged with Acorn School and Nursery in April 2009. The former proprietor of Acorn School and Nursery is the current principal of the newly merged school. The school serves as one of the main feeder schools for entry to the academically highly selective Harpur Trust Schools in Bedford, where the majority of pupils transfer to. There are a small number of pupils with learning difficulties, but none who has a statement of special educational needs. There are several pupils who speak English as an additional language.

The school operates a before and after school facility solely for children who attend the school or nursery. It also provides a holiday club for care out of term times and which is also open to children who do not attend Polam Oaks. The school's accommodation is in specifically converted and adjacent Victorian residences with its own gymnasium, outdoor play area and swimming pool.

The school has six principal aims which focus on pupils' personal and social development. The main aims are to provide care for the under fives as well as promoting traditional values of consideration, good manners and self-discipline through providing academic, sporting and cultural experiences for children up to nine years..

Evaluation of the school

The quality of education, including that in the Early Years Foundation Stage, is good with some strong features. The registered childcare is also good and meets requirements. Under the merger of two schools, with determination and vision, the good quality of care and education for pupils has been maintained, disruption

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² Schools which provide childcare for children from birth until the term in which they reach their third birthday must register this provision separately with Ofsted.

³ www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2006/ukpga_20060021_en_4#pt3-ch2-pb4-l1g49

minimised and there is continuous drive towards improvement. The school meets all of the independent school regulations and it's aims. Pupils' welfare, health and safety, including safeguarding arrangements, are given the necessary priority and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, including behaviour, is consistently good.

Quality of education

The quality of education overall is good. The Cognita Group has ensured that the good reputation of the school has been upheld and the former proprietor of Acorns School and Nursery has worked hard to preserve the strengths of her former school during the merger. Self evaluation is accurate and priorities are suitable. Pupils learn enthusiastically and are well motivated. However, sometimes adults do too much for the younger pupils and those pupils that are capable of greater challenge do not receive sufficient work which allows them to find solutions to problems. Pupils are not currently measured against national norms but consistently meet the entry requirements of their chosen destination schools. Community cohesion has been strengthened with a variety of links with other schools and local establishments, such as residential homes for the elderly.

The curriculum is good and broadly follows the National Curriculum, with strong emphasis on the core skills of literacy and numeracy. The balance has been improved since the last inspection. The provision for information and communication technology (ICT) has improved significantly with the provision of a specific suite which is used for timetabled ICT sessions. Pupils do not always make the most of ICT to enhance their learning in other areas of the curriculum. The curriculum is enhanced by a wide range of curricular and extra-curricular subjects and specialist teaching, for example in art, music and French, where lessons are of a good quality.

Pupils of all abilities, including those with learning difficulties and who speak English as an additional language, are supported effectively and individually to make at least good progress and all pupils achieve well. The progress of those capable of higher achievement is not as high as it could be as, too often, they go over ideas that they have already grasped. They are provided with more work of a similar nature if they finish quickly, rather than work more suited to their higher ability. Teaching and assessment are mostly of a good quality and the newly adopted 'Read, Write, Inc' programme is benefiting pupils' progress in reading and writing. Pupils' reading ages are often well beyond their chronological ages. Planning has improved since the last inspection, with more emphasis on the organisation of lessons, practical ways of learning and the beginnings of a system that takes greater account of pupils' interests and needs. This is still at an early stage. Planning in the out-of-school care is largely informal and child led. However, staff working in this provision also work in school and therefore know the children well, providing continuity. Good relationships between staff and pupils enhance the learning that takes place. Staff generally have high expectations for standards of work, including presentation. Older pupils are aware of their targets, although these are not as clear for younger pupils, and the

system is not consistent across the school. Pupils who are struggling are identified early and are given appropriate support, although the monitoring of these pupils is not yet totally effective to meet current codes of practice. There are systems in place to assess pupils very regularly, although not all staff utilise this information to adapt the lessons sufficiently for the full range of pupils' needs.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

Provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. The links with the locality, visitors to the school and excursions into the community nurture pupils' knowledge and understanding of the world and enable them to make a positive contribution outside the school. From an early age, they learn enthusiastically. A focus on pupils' basic skills, their developing confidence and team building enhances their economic wellbeing. Pupils' pleasure in being at school reflects in their good attendance. They understand the school's expectations for their behaviour which is rarely less than good, with pupils displaying kindness and consideration to each other, particularly in paired working. They are aware of keeping themselves and others safe as they move about the school sensibly. Pupils respect the adults in school and each other. They work alongside others harmoniously and develop tolerance and understanding. The school welcomes families from all backgrounds and actively seeks to promote inclusion in every aspect of school life. There is a good mix of different cultures represented at the school.

Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The school and extended care make good provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety, including in the Early Years Foundation Stage. All of the required policies and procedures are in place, including thorough risk assessments. Essential record keeping and staff training is up-to-date. Fire safety is given suitable priority. The incidences of accidents, formal sanctions and bullying are very low. Pupils, therefore, feel very safe and are confident to talk to adults if they have concerns. Lessons, such as science and personal, social and health education, ensure that pupils have a good understanding of how to stay healthy. They are encouraged to bring healthy snacks and packed lunches, although the school meals do not match these ideals. Pupils benefit from daily exercise in the grounds and regular lessons in the well equipped sports hall on site. Physical education lessons ensure staff build on pupils' existing skills and allow them to progress well physically. Pupils from the classes for three to four-year-olds upwards have weekly swimming lessons where they make good progress, and the quality of these sessions with specialist coaches is high. There is a reasonably good range of extra-curricular physical activities. The school is fully inclusive and meets the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act with a three-year-plan in place.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school complies with the regulations for the appointment of staff. All applicants, including non-teaching staff, are checked with the Criminal Records Bureau and their references and qualifications are corroborated. All the required information is kept on a single central register, which is easily accessible to the responsible authorities. Staff ensure that their child protection training is up-to-date, which was a requirement from the last inspection.

School's premises and accommodation

The accommodation is suitably maintained and fit for purpose. All space is utilised reasonably well and the environment is orderly, ensuring that pupils can access resources easily. The school benefits from specialist teaching spaces, for example for art and design, music and ICT. There is a recently upgraded library, although the school recognises that this is currently underused. The enclosed outdoor space provides a safe environment. It is used mainly for physical activity rather than extending children's learning and choice in the Early Years Foundation Stage. This impacts on the quality of the education for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Washrooms meet regulations and there is a suitable room and facilities to deal with pupils who become ill, which is an improvement since the last inspection. The on site swimming pool enables all pupils to learn an important life skill, developing water confidence from an early age.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school works hard to involve parents as partners in their children's learning. It provides all of the necessary regulatory information for parents. This includes regular reports of their children's progress and parents are also invited to meet with staff termly, as well as at other times when required. Parents receive an information pack which supplements the school prospectus, although this only includes quite brief curriculum information. They periodically receive newsletters. Significant school information related to staffing and school policies is available through the school website. However, the parents section of the school website is currently overly brief. The details of pupils' academic performance are made known each February following the offer of places from the feeder schools. This enables parents to establish whether the school continues to meet its aims. The majority of parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school and are happy with the standard of education and the levels of support their children are receiving.

Procedures for handling complaints

The school's policy and procedures meet requirements.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage is good overall and ensures good outcomes for children, including the youngest toddlers. A warm welcome from familiar staff means that children usually settle easily. Children typically form strong relationships with staff and peers, including those who speak English as an additional language, although the programme for these children is not currently co-ordinated. Children soon learn the routines and respond positively to praise and encouragement. Expectations are clear and children are supported well, consequently their behaviour is consistently good. The early learning goals for the Early Years Foundation Stage form the basis of the curriculum, with an appropriate balance of adult-directed and child-initiated activities. Staff make regular observations of children to inform their assessment and to complete each child's 'Learning Journey' file. Staff recognise the importance of their observations of children linking to tailoring the provision to what children need to learn next. The provision for the children aged from 18 months to two years is particularly high quality. The youngest children are becoming as independent as possible and choose their own resources and activities in a very safe environment. The activities for the older children have not been consistently well planned for. Some are insufficiently demanding and staff do not have sufficiently high expectations, nor make the most of children's capabilities.

There is an excellent range of resources for all areas of the curriculum, except that opportunities for outdoor learning are limited. However, the school is aware of this shortfall in the current provision. Staff compensate for this by taking the children outside daily, but this mainly leads to play and physical activity and the potential of the outside classroom has yet to be exploited. There is an appropriate focus on developing children's awareness of the sounds of letters, in which they are making good progress. This is enhanced by the commercial scheme used by the school and this is providing a sound start in developing children's early reading and writing skills. By the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, most children achieve the levels expected for their age in all areas of learning. The children's good achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage is, in part, due to the favourable staffing ratios and high quality individual support which is given to each child.

Leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage is good overall and had been strengthened this term by a new Head of Nursery. Currently, however, the Reception classes are quite separate from the Nursery provision and their location on the first floor is not ideal as it makes access to the outdoors challenging and often learning inside is interrupted for outside play. The provision for children's welfare is good overall because all policies for the children's welfare and safety are implemented effectively, including regular risk assessments. Meals provided are not always sufficiently nutritious. The school accounts for children's dietary needs, but not necessarily their family's dietary preferences, for example, currently no Halal meat is served. Kitchen staff have all been fully trained in food handling. Other staff

are generally not handling food, except at snack times, and are not warming bottles for the youngest children until they have been appropriately trained to do so.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended ('the Regulations').

In order to comply with the learning and development requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage, the school must:

- Develop the outdoor classroom for all Nursery and Reception children by ensuring that they have regular access to good quality learning experiences outside.

In order to comply with the welfare requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage, the school must:

- provide healthier, nutritious meals which allow for the dietary requirements of all children
- Ensure that staff handling food at any time are appropriately trained.

The school's registered provision for childcare meets the requirements of the Childcare Act 2006.

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- increase the challenge in lessons for the high attaining pupils by ensuring they are given stimulating tasks which develop their thinking skills
- develop the co-ordination of the provision for those pupils who speak English as an additional language or who have learning difficulties or disabilities, ensuring that the school meets the requirements of the current Special Educational Needs Code of Practice
- Ensure that children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are allowed to fully develop their independence skills.

Inspection judgement recording form

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education		✓		
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils		✓		
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs		✓		
How well pupils make progress in their learning		✓		

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development		✓		
The behaviour of pupils		✓		

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils		✓		
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The quality of the Early Years Foundation Stage provision

How good are the outcomes for children in the EYFS?		✓		
What is the quality of provision in the EYFS?		✓		
How effectively is the EYFS led and managed?		✓		
Overall effectiveness: how well does the school meet the needs of children in the EYFS?		✓		

School details

Name of school	Polam Oaks with Little Acorns Nursery School		
DCSF number	820/6000		
Unique reference number	109720		
EY URN (for registered childcare only)	EY311212		
Type of school	First school with nursery		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1923		
Age range of pupils	18 months to 9 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 64	Girls: 42	Total: 106
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 7	Girls: 10	Total: 17
Number of pupils aged 0–3 in registered childcare provision	Boys: 8	Girls: 8	Total: 16
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day pupils)	£ 5790		
Annual fees (childcare)	£ 5190		
Address of school	43 – 45 Lansdowne Road Bedford MK40 2BU		
Telephone number	01234 261864		
Fax number	01234 261194		
Email address	Margaret.mason@polamoaks.co.uk		
Headteacher	Mrs Margaret Mason		
Proprietor	Cognita Schools		
Reporting inspector	Jane Melbourne HMI		
Dates of inspection	13-14 October 2009		