

The Observatory School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	127715
Local Authority	Wirral
Inspection number	341003
Inspection dates	12–13 January 2010
Reporting inspector	Allan Lacey HMI

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	10–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	48
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Cllr T Harney
Headteacher	Mrs Sandra Reilly
Date of previous school inspection	0 June 2007
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Introduction

An additional Ofsted inspector carried out this inspection. The inspector visited six lessons, and held meetings with governors, parents and carers, staff and groups of students. The inspector reviewed many aspects of the school's work and looked in detail at the following: the school's development plan, safeguarding policies, students' books, assessment records and case studies, minutes of various meetings, including governors, and the school's own data on parental views. The inspector also analysed the 12 parents' and carers' questionnaires and 23 students' questionnaires received.

The inspector reviewed many aspects of the school's work, looking in detail at the following:

- the effectiveness of the school in meeting the very diverse needs of the students
- how well the curriculum is designed to meet the needs, interests and aspirations of all students
- how effectively the school works with parents and carers, and other agencies to promote students' learning and well-being
- the effectiveness and reliability of the safeguarding of students.

Information about the school

The school provides education and support for students with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. The school was opened in 2005 and was last inspected in June 2007. Most students join the school in Year 7, with a small number joining at different ages in their school career. All students have a statement of special educational needs. The great majority of students are of White British heritage. Most students come from the local Wirral area. The girl to boy ratio is one to five. Currently, 10 students are looked after by the local authority and four are on the child protection register. Well above average numbers are entitled to free school meals. The school operates an extended day with all students attending a breakfast club. The school has the Healthy Schools Award.

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

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

3

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

3

Main findings

The Observatory School provides a satisfactory quality of education. It provides an outstandingly high standard of care, guidance and support for every student. Behaviour is good and the school has forged very effective links with parents and carers

Many students join the school having experienced significant difficulties, often resulting in high absence, low attainment and poor self-esteem. The calm and supportive ethos, high expectations of behaviour and well-embedded systems of rewards provide students with the structure and security they need to engage in learning. Although students' attainment remains low overall, the majority of students leaving school in 2009 gained basic qualifications in English and mathematics. Most students are making at least satisfactory progress in their learning and some make good progress. Teaching is satisfactory, with some examples of good teaching. There is some variability between classes. As a result, a few students are not always fully challenged in their learning. Students enjoy coming to school and as one said, 'It is great here! I hated school and I never went, but I love coming here!' The school has close and extremely effective links with external agencies and other partners to ensure health, well-being and good prospects for students.

Excellent care, guidance and support are central to the school's provision. The school rightly prides itself on how well it understands and appreciates the challenges its students face. Students enjoy the opportunities provided by the satisfactory curriculum to undertake a wide range of activities. However, there is a lack of opportunities to develop skills of enterprise and information and communication technology (ICT).

Leaders and managers have a clear understanding of the needs of the local community informed through direct contact with neighbourhood groups. The school contributes to its local community well with a number of important links established.

The leadership team is clearly focused on achieving the best for every student in the school. The recently appointed headteacher is ensuring that each member of the team has a clear understanding of the school's vision and is instilling an underlying ethos of challenge for all students, regardless of their difficulties. The leadership team carries out extensive monitoring activities. However, their findings are not always evaluated rigorously enough to determine the impact of initiatives and developments on outcomes for students. The school has maintained satisfactory improvement in a time of significant change since the previous inspection. For example, there has been a significant trend of improvement in students' behaviour and their attendance, and a reduction in the numbers of students being excluded. Essential systems are in place to enable the school to continue to develop and the school has a satisfactory capacity for further sustained

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improvement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve learning and progress across the curriculum for students of all abilities by:
 - making more effective use of assessment to ensure that teaching consistently meets the needs of all students
 - ensuring that teachers' expectations of what students can achieve are always sufficiently challenging.
- Develop the curriculum by:
 - creating interesting and challenging teaching programmes which reflect the needs, interests and aspirations of all students
 - improving the provision for the development of information and communication technology and skills of enterprise
 - increasing the range of appropriate accredited courses.
- About 40% of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

3

Attainment on entry to the school is well below the national average for the majority of students. Many students have had negative experiences of the education system, with many having been excluded from mainstream schools. A number of students have some degree of underlying learning difficulty or specific learning difficulties. A small minority join with attainment broadly in line for their ages. Students are keen to learn from a wide range of new experiences. They make satisfactory progress in their learning, with good and sometimes outstanding progress in their personal development.

Students feel safe from bullying in school and regard the school as a safe place to be. They say that if bullying does take place it is dealt with fairly and consistently. Behaviour is good throughout the school. The incidents of challenging behaviour that may interrupt learning are decreasing and are managed very effectively through the school's thoughtful and effective approach. Parents and carers strongly agree that their children feel happy and safe at school. Students have a good understanding of the factors to promote a healthy lifestyle, personal safety and well-being both physically and psychologically. Students make a satisfactory and developing contribution to the local community. The school council effectively represents the views of all students and influences school development. The school has put in place effective strategies to improve attendance and these have brought about an improvement in overall attendance and a reduction in the number of children who are persistently absent from school. The number of exclusions has reduced and this is an indication of the effectiveness of the school's systems for rewarding good behaviour and dealing effectively with inappropriate behaviour.

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Students' spiritual, moral social and cultural development is good. Students talk about their feelings and understand the need for good behaviour. They show a good understanding of what constitutes racist behaviour and why racism is wrong. Students learn about and have had a number of experiences of engaging with people from other cultures, for example, through a developing link with a school in Madagascar. Effective advice and guidance play a key role in encouraging the students to continue in education and training or to actively seek employment when they leave school. Students are equipped well on a personal and social level to leave school and to take the next steps in their lives due to the effective programme provided by the school. They achieve some success in nationally recognised awards; however, the range of such qualifications is limited. Boys and girls do as well as each other and looked after children also achieve as well as others in school.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	3
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	4
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	3
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	4
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

How effective is the provision?

In most lessons, teachers and their assistants motivate students well by identifying and praising their achievements. Students' attention to what they are doing is usually good;

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

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they try exceptionally hard to do as well as they can. On occasions, teaching is less effective because, assessment has not been used well enough to ensure that teaching meets the different needs of the students. As a result, the expectations of teachers in a few lessons are not as high as they could be. In lessons, teaching assistants provide valuable support to students. Relationships between students and staff are excellent and students help one another where they can.

Care, guidance and support are of the highest quality. Students have a high level of trust in staff and are confident to ask for support. Care and support meet the needs of individuals on a day-to-day basis and during periods of crises. Partnership work with a range of agencies contributes effectively to sustain the engagement of vulnerable students in learning. Leadership of care, guidance and support is exemplary.

The curriculum is satisfactory. There is an appropriate emphasis on the basic skills that students need in literacy and numeracy. The exciting curriculum developments which are taking place in art and design, design and technology, personal and social education, and science, have yet to be reflected in other curriculum areas, most notably literacy, numeracy and ICT. The work-related learning that takes place for the older students is of high quality and provides an effective bridge to the next stage of students' lives. The teaching and cross-curricular use of ICT is underdeveloped, as is the incorporation of enterprise skills into the curriculum.

Risk assessments are rigorous. Planning for the movement of students from the one class to the next is good. Similarly, the transition from school to other placements and establishments is well considered and effectively planned.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	3
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher has instilled passion and commitment in the staff team. This is evident in their students' enjoyment in coming to school and in the outstandingly positive esteem in which the school is held by parents and carers. The strong vision for school improvement is shared by all staff.

The school's self-evaluation is generally accurate. Nevertheless, the school does not analyse its performance as well as it might, for example, by using available data to identify the impact of actions and initiatives on students' outcomes. The school's moderation of the assessments of students' work is underdeveloped, as is its use of local and national data to compare students' performance with that of students with similar

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levels of special educational needs and/or learning disabilities nationwide. Subject leadership is developing, but does not involve comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of subjects. The governing body includes a good range of expertise and fulfils its statutory duties satisfactorily. It has yet to develop its role as a full participant in the planning, execution and evaluation of the plans for school improvement.

The school successfully promotes equality of opportunity. It has a deep understanding of every individual and is closing gaps in students' behaviour, attendance and achievement often from a low starting point. Support meets the needs of young people in care and actions to remove barriers to their learning enable them to become fully involved in the curriculum provision.

Engagement with parents, other partnerships with local schools, health professionals, the police service, and other support services are outstanding. They make a major contribution to the students' learning and well-being as evidenced, for example by the outstanding work of the school based community police office in establishing relationships of trust and respect among the students for the local police service.

The school is a very harmonious community which the students clearly enjoy being a part of. Leaders and managers have a clear understanding of the needs of the local community informed through direct contact with neighbourhood groups. The school has established a number of important links with its local community and plays an important role within it.

The school's systems to safeguard students are of good quality.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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

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Views of parents and carers

Parents and carers are supportive of the school and many commented on how well staff know their children and adapt learning to meet the individual temperaments and needs of all students. They recognise the high level of staff commitment in supporting their children and greatly value the 'down to earth' approach of all staff. Regular and helpful information sharing as well as personal contact are strong features of why parents and carers feel engaged and supported by the school.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of students registered at The Observatory School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspector received 12 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 49 students registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	7	58	5	42	0	0	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	4	33	8	67	0	0	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	4	33	8	67	0	0	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	6	50	5	42	1	8	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	8	67	4	33	0	0	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	7	58	5	42	0	0	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	6	50	4	33	2	17	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	6	50	6	50	0	0	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	7	58	4	33	1	8	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	8	67	3	25	1	8	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	4	33	8	67	0	0	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	9	75	3	25	0	0	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	9	75	3	25	0	0	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
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.

Overall effectiveness of schools inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
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.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



14 January 2010

Dear Students

Inspection of The Observatory School, Prenton, CH43 7QT

Thank you for your help with the inspection. I enjoyed meeting you and learning about your school. I am writing this letter to tell you what I found.

The Observatory School is a satisfactory school which cares for you exceptionally well. Most of you enjoy your work, feel safe and have someone you can talk to if you are upset or worried. You told me that the curriculum and the sports activities, trips and visits are the features you like the most. I especially liked the pictures of your visit to the Magistrate's Court and the Santa ride on the plane. Most of you are making progress to improve your attendance and behaviour. I, agree with the school staff that you could make even faster progress in all your school subjects too.

I have asked the staff to keep a closer eye on how well you are doing and to help you make better progress by:

- checking on how well you are doing to find out what else they can do to improve your progress. You can help by letting your teacher know if the work you are given is too easy or too difficult
- making sure that your lessons are even more interesting and challenging.

I have also asked the school to look at:

- providing a greater range of qualifications for you to gain before you leave school.
- Good luck in all you do and best wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely

Allan Lacey

Additional Inspector

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