

Alternative Curriculum 14-19

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	131066
Local Authority	West Berkshire
Inspection number	341089
Inspection dates	16–17 June 2010
Reporting inspector	Paul Canham

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	14–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	42
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Headteacher	Jacque Davies
Date of previous school inspection	10 July 2007
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. They visited four lessons and observed four teachers. The inspectors also held discussions with a member of the management committee, staff and outside agencies, and talked with parents and students. They looked at a range of documentation, including assessment and attendance information, lesson plans, safeguarding arrangements, development planning, management committee minutes and students' work. The inspectors also scrutinised questionnaires from staff and a sample of students, and two questionnaires that were returned by parents and carers.

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

- the extent to which the flexible curriculum and the personalised learning programmes are raising levels of achievement and getting students more involved in their learning
- the effectiveness of the senior management in managing a provision that is located on different sites
- the influence of the management committee on the service's direction and capacity for sustained improvement.

Information about the school

Alternative Curriculum 14-19, also known as the Alternative Curriculum Service (ACS), serves a wide geographical area. It provides alternative full-time education for 42 students in Years 10–13, who have been permanently excluded from a mainstream school or who have been identified by a mainstream school as needing a more personalised learning plan. Almost all students are from families of White British heritage and there are similar numbers of boys and girls. A significant proportion of students have not attended their mainstream schools for a considerable period. Currently, 16 per cent of students have a statement of special educational need and these attend the ACS full or part time, but usually remain on the roll of their mainstream school.

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The service has achieved the Healthy Schools Award. At the time of the inspection, students in Years 11, 12 and 13 were taking external examinations.

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?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

The ACS provides a good education for its students. It achieves its success through the hard work of determined staff under the strong leadership of the headteacher, who is passionate about developing the best provision and gaining the highest outcomes for all students and their families. One of the several outstanding features is the extremely supportive and nurturing environment in all the centres, which places a high priority on enhancing students' self-esteem and in developing their confidence. Parents and carers are very supportive of the ACS's work and indicate that they welcome the influence it is having on their children's attitudes, behaviour and academic progress.

Students benefit from excellent care, guidance and support. Consequently, they make outstanding progress in developing their self-esteem. Such an improvement transforms students' attitudes and helps them to establish a secure platform from which they develop the confidence to make up for substantial deficits in their education. Students also benefit from good teaching and, as a result, they make good gains in the core skills of literacy and numeracy. The proportion of students who gain GCSE passes, or equivalent, is broadly similar to the national average for mainstream schools. In addition, all students reach other nationally recognised accreditations and gain success in a number of vocational courses. This picture represents good progress because, in a relatively short period, the ACS transforms students' attitudes and makes up for substantial shortfalls in their education. Behaviour also improves significantly as a result of clear expectations and strong relationships developed with staff. It is an indicator of the ACS's success that the very large majority of students attend regularly. Such significant improvements lay down firm foundations for the students' enrolment at college or successful employment.

Teaching is effective because staff know each student, including their needs and backgrounds, extremely well and use detailed information to help with planning. Individual targets are used very well by staff and students to accelerate personal and academic progress. Students say that they feel very safe and secure in a supportive environment and the trust developed between students and staff is at the hub of this success.

The highly flexible curriculum, which is made possible by the range of support and expertise at different centres, is extremely well suited to the needs of students. The careful balance between core skills and the development of students' creative and performance skills makes it relevant and meaningful. Underpinned by a comprehensive programme of personal, social and health education, students benefit from a very well-constructed personalised learning programme. However, the ACS knows it must do more to help students develop a better understanding of people's backgrounds and

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communities in other parts of the United Kingdom and globally.

The ACS has rigorous systems in place to monitor the progress of students. Key staff have an accurate understanding of where the service is now and of the improvements needed. Knowledgeable committee members continually challenge the effectiveness of the provision, which is well placed to move forward. However, the ACS recognises the need to review the way it draws together information from each centre and improve efficiency by getting leaders to work more closely together.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen the efficiency of management by streamlining the monitoring process and enable centres to work together more closely to share common systems and goals.
- Extend the strategy for community cohesion by creating more opportunities for students to appreciate and value people from a wide variety of backgrounds and communities nationally and globally.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

There are demonstrable signs that ACS's unremitting efforts and well-informed support are making a substantial difference, resulting in students' good gains in academic work and outstanding personal development. Students considerably improve their self-esteem and independence, and learn to interact positively with each other and the adults with whom they meet and work. These positive characteristics successfully increase students' interest in, and enjoyment of, education. Students' attitudes and confidence develop as they experience the ACS's highly supportive learning environment that is evident at all centres. Their willingness to participate in learning, including the range of activities, as seen in English and horticulture, reflect good learning. Students also show great satisfaction in completing the tasks and explaining the reasons behind their answers, in English, for example. As a result of the ACS's determination to encourage enterprise, work experience and courses related to life skills, students are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.

Students typically demonstrate high levels of emotional and/or social needs, which have resulted in lengthy periods of absence from mainstream school. Consequently, students enter the ACS with large gaps in their skills and knowledge, and with a negative view about themselves and towards education. The amount of time students spend at the ACS varies, but the rate of progress is such that the majority of students are successful in making up for some of the lost time and overcoming several of the substantial barriers they faced when they started. As result of this good progress, the proportion of students who gain GCSE passes, or equivalent, are broadly similar to the national average for mainstream schools. In addition, all students gain other accreditation in English and mathematics and a number of vocational courses.

Students make particularly good progress in learning about themselves and improving their self-esteem because of the sensitive and individualised support provided by staff

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and other professionals. For all students, this response is a marked change when set against the personal challenges they have had in the past and which they continue to face. Students say they feel exceptionally safe and gain confidence in an environment that has clear boundaries and expectations that are consistently applied. Students are given opportunities to present views and help with decisions regarding the running of each centre. Although relationships are often fragile, students are polite and usually talk with staff and visitors in a respectful manner. A notable strength is the way older students reflect on the way they have behaved and express an extremely good understanding of what is right and wrong. Behaviour is good and students like the fact that they are respected by staff, their views are valued, and they are treated fairly. Students see their time within the centres as an opportunity to turn their lives around. Parents reported that their children's interests have rekindled and improved attitudes have led to them taking a greater pride in themselves. Students' substantially improved attendance reflects positive attitudes. For most, it is the first time they have attended school on a regular basis.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

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

How effective is the provision?

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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Particular strengths of teaching lie in detailed planning based upon a thorough knowledge of each student and the collaborative approach taken by teachers and other adults, who provide closely tailored support. Exceptionally good relationships with students help staff to raise expectations, manage behaviour and encourage them into doing their best. Lesson objectives are made clear to ensure, for example, that students understand what skills they will develop during the lesson. Questioning is used well to probe students' understanding and help adjust the range of tasks and pace of learning. Where teaching was most successful, students' contributions were shared with sensitivity and used very effectively to raise expectations for others. Assessment is closely linked to individual behaviour and academic targets.

A key strength of the curriculum lies in its flexibility and the ability to offer students individualised support and learning experiences that reflect their interests and match their needs. For example, at one of the centres, particular attention is given to addressing students' high levels of emotional and/or social needs in the first instance. However, personal, social and health education (PSHE) underpins the curriculum at all centres and forms a significant part of each student's personalised learning programme. Students' learning experiences include a carefully constructed balance between basic skills in literacy and numeracy and the development of creative and performing skills in subjects such as art, horticulture and outdoor adventurous activities. The breadth of the curriculum is also made possible by the different range of activities offered at college, outdoor activity centres, and by local businesses. There is a balanced and realistic approach towards students following courses leading to GCSEs and opportunities for them to achieve external accreditation in, for example, skills related to the building industry, farming, car mechanics and hair and beauty.

The outstanding support for students' personal development and pastoral care is recognised and valued by parents and carers. One parent's comment represents the positive response made by others: 'Staff have been really good at getting him back into a learning environment and involving him in different activities.' Students have a good understanding of their targets for personal development and appreciate how the consistent and sensitive support has a positive effect on their self-esteem. Staff show great resolve to ensuring that students are exceptionally well cared for and supported. They are extremely alert to the fact that no two days are alike and students can arrive on any day with varying levels of interest and willingness to engage. Attention to students' health and well-being is reflected, not just in opportunities for physical activity, but also in the provision of healthy food and health-related courses. Progress, both academic and personal, is closely tracked and monitored.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1

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The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1
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How effective are leadership and management?

Strong leadership, underpinned by a determined headteacher, has established a service that places a high priority on developing students' self-esteem, building their confidence and lifting levels of achievement. The headteacher, with strong support from the management committee and committed staff, has ensured that the provision, including care, guidance and support, has made substantial improvement since the last inspection. The autonomy with which each of the centres manages the needs of students is a particular strength. However, key staff in each centre do not share their individual processes or information sufficiently well to ensure that they are working collaboratively and efficiently towards a common goal.

The ACS promotes equality and tackles any form of discrimination exceptionally well. Documentation indicates that the service has a secure understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement. Staff, who have realistic expectations of where they want their students to be, demonstrate a good capacity for moving on. The management committee is supportive and the chair works closely with the headteacher, giving well-considered guidance and advice. Knowledgeable and very experienced committee members challenge the effectiveness of ACS's development. Attention to students' safety is integral to its work and safeguarding procedures are systematic, continually reviewed and very firmly established.

Community cohesion is well promoted within the ACS, and partnerships with outside agencies are used exceptionally well to enhance the well-being of students. The ACS reaches out to parents and carers, who are given very good opportunities to give views on the provision and benefit from regular contact. However, the ACS knows it must do more to help students gain a better understanding of people's backgrounds and communities in other parts of the United Kingdom and globally.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
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	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1

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The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Views of parents and carers

Two parents returned questionnaires for this inspection. However, a greater number completed a survey, sent out by the ACS earlier in the year, which included similar questions. The responses to almost all these questions were extremely positive.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of students registered at the Alternative Curriculum 14-19 (ACS) to complete a questionnaire about their views of the provision. In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the provision. The inspection team received two completed questionnaire by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 42 students registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	0	0	2	100	0	0	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	2	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	2	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	1	50	1	50	0	0	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	2	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	1	50	1	50	0	0	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	1	50	1	50	0	0	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)	1	50	1	50	0	0	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	1	50	1	50	0	0	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	2	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	1	50	1	50	0	0	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	2	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	2	100	0	0	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

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	51	45	0	4
Primary schools	6	41	42	10
Secondary schools	8	34	44	14
Sixth forms	10	37	50	3
Special schools	32	38	25	5
Pupil referral units	12	43	31	14
All schools	9	40	40	10

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 is for the period 1 September to 31 December 2009 and is the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn term 2009 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

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.



18 June 2010

Dear Students

Inspection of Alternative Curriculum 14-19 (ACS), Newbury, RG14 7BT

Thank you for all the help you gave us when we visited your centres. We enjoyed talking to you, sitting in your lessons and listening to your interesting views. You told us that the ACS makes a significant difference to your behaviour and attitudes to learning. It is clear that you value the life-changing opportunities that the service offers you.

This letter is to tell you about some of the things we found while we were with you. It's a good service, where you feel very safe and secure and enjoy taking part in the wide range of interesting and meaningful activities. Staff have clear expectations of you and provide clear guidelines for you to follow.

Here are some important things about the ACS.

- The service is well led and managed.
- Effective teaching helps you to make good progress.
- You achieve well when account is taken of your starting points when you join.
- The large majority of you reach standards in the external examinations and assessments that are similar to those found in mainstream schools.
- You are well prepared to move on to the next stage of your lives.
- All staff take extremely good care of you, and make sure you have a good understanding of what makes for a healthy lifestyle and a healthy diet.

To make things even better for you, the ACS has been asked to

- get the different centres to work more closely together to improve efficiency
- help you to understand more about people's backgrounds and communities in the United Kingdom and around the world.

We wish each one of you every success in your future and hope that you continue to help yourselves to make things better.

Yours sincerely

Paul Canham

Lead inspector

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