

The Phoenix Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	131629
Local Authority	Darlington
Inspection number	341179
Inspection dates	19–20 January 2010
Reporting inspector	Christine Graham HMI

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	69
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Pat Armstrong
Headteacher	Mrs Maxine Hepple
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one additional inspector. The inspectors spent the majority of the inspection looking at learning and students' progress. Inspectors observed eight lessons which involved fifteen teachers or teaching assistants and held meetings with representatives of the management committee, a representative of the local authority, the headteacher, the deputy headteachers, staff and groups of students. They observed the centre's work, and looked at external evaluations of the centre, students' books, the centre's policies and its self-evaluation and improvement planning, and 10 parental and nine staff questionnaires.

- students' achievement and their learning and progress
- the effectiveness and accuracy of the centre's assessment arrangements
- students' attendance and their attitudes and behaviour
- the centre's safeguarding arrangements.

Information about the school

The Phoenix Centre caters for students who have already been excluded from, or are at risk of exclusion from secondary schools. Students have a long history of poor attendance and disaffection. The centre caters for the full range of ability and some students are very able. All students have special educational needs and/or disabilities and a small proportion have a statement of special educational needs. Most of these needs relate to behavioural and emotional issues, but some students also have additional learning needs. The centre was designed to cater for up to 50 students and there are currently 69 students on roll. They access a range of provision which includes lessons in the centre, home tutoring, work placement and college courses and training with external providers. Most students are of White British heritage. All students are eligible for free school meals.

When the centre was inspected in October 2006 it was judged to require special measures. It was monitored on four occasions and when it was re-inspected in November 2008 it was given a notice to improve. The centre received a monitoring visit in July 2009 and was judged to be making satisfactory progress.

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?

4

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

4

Main findings

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this pupil referral unit requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the centre are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement.

The centre has not progressed well enough since it was issued with a notice to improve because the headteacher has not tackled the remaining weaknesses with sufficient vigour or urgency. She does not expect enough of staff and students and staff are not provided with sufficient guidance to ensure that the provision made for students improves. The centre's policies are not applied consistently and as a result, students are not clear as to what is expected of them. The centre does not help students acquire the skills which would allow them to reintegrate into mainstream schools. There are serious shortcomings in the centre's arrangements to safeguard students. The centre does not routinely record information about students' behaviour and exclusions or about serious incidents so it cannot evaluate its provision and identify where improvements which would benefit students could be made.

Students' achievement is inadequate. Those who attend regularly make satisfactory and sometimes good progress. More students leave the centre with external qualifications and accreditations than did so in the past and teachers' expectations of what students might achieve are improving. However, teachers' tracking and assessment data shows that many students, especially the most able, do not attain as well as they should because they have poor attendance or are excluded. Many students behave well for much of the time, but a worryingly high proportion of students leave lessons and roam around the building. They know that this type of behaviour frequently results in them being sent home. The centre does not have a well thought out, consistently applied, strategy to reward students' positive attitudes and behaviour, and as a consequence there is more enjoyment to be gained from poor behaviour than from making a positive contribution to lessons. The centre is over-subscribed, but this is not contributing to its inadequacies because few students attend lessons regularly.

Teaching is generally satisfactory but teachers do not take enough account of information from day-to-day or longer-term assessments when planning work for students. The spread of ability in teaching groups is wide but in many lessons all students are given the same tasks. There is an over reliance on the use of undemanding worksheets and there are few opportunities for students to apply knowledge in practical or investigative tasks. The curriculum is satisfactory and improving but clearly does not yet meet all students' needs well.

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Students say that they feel safe and that there is no bullying. They have generally positive relationships with their peers and they are polite to visitors. The centre is a fairly cohesive community but students have too few opportunities to make a positive contribution to the centre or the local community. Students' spiritual and moral, social and cultural development is inadequate. The care, guidance and support provided for students are inadequate. Staff have good relationships with students but there are too few opportunities for students to develop independent skills or make choices or decisions. The centre does not ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn and make progress. The centre's capacity to make further improvement is inadequate and it does not provide satisfactory value for money.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Carry out a thorough review of safeguarding arrangements and:
 - ensure that all information relating to students' well-being and safety is recorded
 - analyse information regularly in order to ensure that the provision made for students meets their needs and helps them to improve their behaviour
 - ensure that information is accessible and cross referenced so that staff can identify potential problems at an early stage.
- Improve outcomes for students by:
 - implementing a behaviour management strategy which helps students to remain in the centre
 - rewarding positive behaviour
 - maximising opportunities to engage and motivate students
 - ensuring that students develop skills and attitudes which will support their successful eventual reintegration into mainstream schools.
- Improve the centre's effectiveness by:
 - ensuring that the headteacher and senior leaders implement a regular and robust system of self-evaluation which helps the centre to measure the impact of its actions and identify strengths and areas for improvement
 - providing teachers and other staff with well targeted guidance which will help them to improve their practice and the provision made for students
 - implementing policies which reflect the centre's ambitions for its students and ensure that all staff, students and parents are clear as to what is expected of them.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**4**

Students are assessed on entry to the centre and at regular intervals throughout the year. Data indicate that students make steady progress. However, evidence from the

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inspection shows that students do not always progress as well as they might in some lessons because the tasks they are given are dull and are not well matched to their abilities. Some of the most-able students are not challenged enough and the least able cannot complete the work. This sometimes leads to disruptive behaviour and a lack of motivation. Although more students gain external accreditations and qualifications than was the case in the past, some students do not always attain as well as they could because they do not attend lessons regularly. The centre has recently started to enter students for GCSE examinations in mathematics. Although most attain the lowest grades, this is having a positive impact on their self-esteem and motivation. Students that benefit from off-site provision, especially that provided at 'The Bridge', make satisfactory and often good progress. Students achieve well in information and communication technology (ICT) and they have good opportunities to use and apply these skills in other subjects. This has a very positive impact on their progress and on their willingness to work. They do not have the same opportunities to apply literacy and numeracy skills. Students have too few opportunities to work with a partner or in a group and they do not routinely assess their work and set targets. When they are given these opportunities they respond very positively. Many students behave well and they are usually polite to each other and to adults, but some teachers do not expect enough of them so they behave differently in different lessons.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	4
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	3
Pupils' behaviour	4
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	4
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	4
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	4

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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The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

4

How effective is the provision?

Teaching is satisfactory. Teachers have good relationships with students and know them well. In the best lessons, teachers plan tasks which are well matched to students' interests and abilities and which allow all students to experience success. These teachers have high expectations of all and establish clear boundaries. Students are expected to present themselves appropriately and focus on their tasks. In these lessons, behaviour and attitudes are usually very positive and students make rapid progress. There are too few lessons of this quality however because many teachers do not use information from day-to-day or longer-term assessments to plan tasks for their students. Teachers do not provide students with sufficient guidance to help them improve their work or eradicate weaknesses. The centre believes that this improves students' confidence, but students frequently complain that their work is 'boring'. They are usually correct. Many students manage to complete tasks which are apparently too difficult for them because they receive a great deal of support. Despite the limited independent working, some teachers believe that this is evidence of successful learning. Teachers do not always consider the small improvements which could minimise disruptive behaviour. They do not make the most of the space available in classrooms and do not always use new technologies, such as interactive whiteboards, to best effect. The curriculum is satisfactory and improving. It is modified to meet the needs of individuals and groups of students. The most vulnerable students are provided with home tuition as an extension of after-school activities. This provision is thoughtful and well organised. Options sessions are designed to promote students interests and the gardening sessions provides opportunities for students to engage with the local community and spend time outside the centre.

The care, guidance and support provided for students are inadequate. The centre does not provide students or their parents with clear guidance about its expectations. It does not apply its policies rigorously or ensure that all staff adopt consistent approaches. As a result, teachers' expectations of students vary considerably and staff do not routinely ensure that students' behaviour, vocabulary and actions are monitored and corrected. The centre has not introduced strategies to prevent disruption or challenging behaviour and it does not collect or analyse data about incidents of unacceptable behaviour, in order to identify why disruption occurs. The centre's policy of sending disruptive students home is promoting poor behaviour and placing students at risk. Students absent from lessons are pursued around the corridors by staff. This poses a risk to their safety and that of other students. The centre does too little to promote students' personal skills and they are not given opportunities to make more sensible choices or decisions.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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The quality of teaching Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
	4
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	3
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	4

How effective are leadership and management?

The centre does not monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its provision and as a result, it has too positive a view of its own effectiveness. The headteacher has resolved some of the serious issues connected with the building, but she has been less successful in eradicating long-standing weaknesses and improving the provision made for students. There is a lack of rigour in some of the centre's procedures and a lack of consistency in the way in which it deals with students. The headteacher has not ensured that the centre is fully compliant with the latest guidance on safeguarding students and a very high proportion of staff have not received relevant training. Staff work hard, but are not provided with sufficient guidance to help them improve their practice and thus make a greater impact on students' lives. There are some undoubted strengths in the centre's provision, but the headteacher cannot always articulate these or provide secure evidence of where improvements have been made. The centre works well with other services and local schools but this does not always have a sufficient impact on students' well-being because it is undermined by inadequate provision in the centre. Its work with parents is at an early stage. The management committee has a secure understanding of the centre and has drawn up protocols for students that are hard to place and for admission to the centre. A pupil placement panel has been established and key members of staff from the local authority sit on the panel. The committee meets regularly but does not always have a sufficient focus on the centre's overall effectiveness. The centre has been well supported by the local authority during the last three years but has not developed the capacity to improve without external support.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	4
	4
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	4
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	3

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The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	4
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	4
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	4

Views of parents and carers

Very few parents returned questionnaires. Most of those that did so are happy with the centre's provision. Three parents noted that they had seen a big improvement in their child's attitudes and behaviour in the time that they had been at the centre. One parent was less positive and asked why students are excluded from the centre for being challenging and difficult since the centre was set up to deal with students exhibiting challenging behaviour. Inspectors agree that students do seem reasonably happy at the centre and get on well with one another and with staff. This may have an impact on their attitudes and behaviour at home. Inspectors agree that too many students are excluded for being difficult and the centre should have strategies to ensure that they remain in lessons.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at The Phoenix Centre 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 inspection team received 10 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 69 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	1	10	5	50	1	10	2	20
The school keeps my child safe	2	20	7	70	1	10	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	3	30	7	70	0	0	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	2	20	6	60	1	10	1	10
The teaching is good at this school	3	30	5	50	1	10	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	2	20	6	60	2	20	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	1	10	8	80	1	10	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)	3	30	5	50	1	10	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	3	30	5	50	2	20	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	3	30	5	50	2	20	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	3	30	6	60	1	10	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	3	30	6	60	1	10	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	2	20	6	60	2	20	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.



21 January 2010

Dear Students

Inspection of The Phoenix Centre, Darlington, DL3 0NS

Thank you for being so cooperative when I visited the centre with another inspector recently. Although there are some positive things about the centre, when we considered all the evidence, we decided that it is not providing you with a good enough education and it is not doing all it should to ensure that you are kept safe. The centre has now been placed in 'special measures'. This means that inspectors will visit again at regular intervals to ensure that things are improving at a brisk enough rate.

You told us that the work you are given is sometimes boring and we agree with you. We were pleased to see that in some lessons or when working at 'The Bridge' you are well behaved and work well. This helps you to make good progress but it does not happen in all lessons because you are not always given clear guidance as to what is expected of you and all teachers do not have the same high expectations. This is confusing for you and it does not help you to develop the skills you need to return to mainstream schools or have successful future lives. Some of you are very able, but the work you are given does not challenge you enough and your teachers do not always tell you how to improve. The staff do too much for you and do not allow you to develop independent skills or take responsibility.

We are concerned about poor attendance. We think some of you often behave badly because you want to be sent home. If you are not in the centre you cannot learn and the staff cannot be sure that you are safe. When we looked at your work it was obvious that some of you could pass examinations with good grades, but because you do not attend regularly you are not well prepared for the examinations. We think it would be better if there were some positive incentives to persuade you to improve your behaviour. We have said that all information about your behaviour and attendance must be recorded and that the centre must do all it can to ensure that you are kept safe. You can all play your part by attending regularly and telling staff, politely, when you think your work is too easy or too difficult.

We enjoyed talking with you and hearing your views and we feel that you can make a positive contribution to the improvement process.

Yours sincerely

Mrs C.E Graham

Her Majesty's Inspector

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