

Unity Learning Centre

Inspection report

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| Unique Reference Number | 135767 |
| Local Authority | Nottingham City |
| Inspection number | 341696 |
| Inspection dates | 14–15 December 2009 |
| Reporting inspector | Sue Aldridge |

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

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| Type of school | Pupil referral unit |
| School category | Pupil referral unit |
| Age range of pupils | 14–16 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 133 |
| Appropriate authority | The local authority |
| Headteacher | Terry Dixon (acting) |
| Date of previous school inspection | 5 December 2009 |
| School address | Forest Way West Nottingham NG7 4ES |
| Telephone number | 0115 9151271 |
| Fax number | 0115 9151272 |
| Email address | Terry.dixon@nottinghamcity.gov.uk |

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester M2 7LA

T: 08456 404045

Textphone: 0161 618 8524

E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 11 lessons; three of these were joint observations with the headteacher and two were away from the centre's site at providers in Nottingham. Inspectors held discussions with students, staff, the school improvement partner, representatives from the local authority and the management committee. They observed the centre's work, and activities at two providers of vocational placements. They looked at policies, records, personal education plans, evidence of students' progress and a small number of questionnaires returned by students, staff and four parents.

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

- how effectively the provision enables learners to make academic progress
- whether the team that includes achievement managers and learning mentors has a significant impact on the outcomes for students
- whether the centre has sufficient capacity to secure and sustain improvement.

Information about the school

Unity Learning Centre opened in September 2008. It is one of 12 pilot projects that form part of a national programme ('Back on Track') to develop innovative practice both on and off pupil referral unit sites, in partnership with businesses, community and college providers. It provides for 133 students. These include 79 students who have been permanently excluded from schools and 10 students without a school place. The remainder also attend full time, but remain on the rolls of their mainstream schools, as they are at risk of exclusion. About two thirds of students are boys. Although the great majority are of White British origin, the student population reflects the ethnic diversity of the city of Nottingham. The proportion eligible for free school meals is above average. The percentage identified as having special educational needs is also above average; students mainly have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, although none has a statement of special educational needs. The headteacher resigned in January 2009 and a headteacher was seconded from a mainstream school to fill the post. The great majority of staff are employed on temporary contracts, many provided through an agency. This is linked to work-force reforms in the local authority and a freeze on permanent appointments.

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

3

Main findings

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this centre requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could reasonably be expected to perform. The centre is therefore given a notice to improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to securing greater stability in staffing, reducing persistent absence and increasing the proportion of good teaching so that the majority of students make good progress and reach the standards of which they are capable. Teaching is satisfactory and good practice is increasing. As a result, students make satisfactory progress in lessons. However, the outcomes for students are inadequate because they are not making fast enough progress to make up for lost learning and reach the standards of which they are capable. Their attainment is too low, as is their attendance. Almost all teachers have good relationships with students and manage them sensitively and well. Expectations of work rate and behaviour are generally high. Students are given good guidance about course requirements and what to do to improve their grades. Progress is often charted on classroom walls so that students can see clearly what they need to do to achieve a pass, merit or grade. In lesson plans, teachers do not always identify clearly enough the learning objectives for each session, or review students' success at the end and involve them in this process. Occasionally, progress in lessons is slowed by weaknesses in managing behaviour or moving on to more challenging tasks before students are confident to do so. Most learning mentors support learning and behaviour well in lessons, although plans do not always identify clearly their precise role.

The centre is improving following a difficult start. The current headteacher has successfully raised the expectations of staff and students and this has resulted in a much improved climate for learning. The headteacher has secured funds which have been used effectively to make the internal environment fit for purpose. Improvements in students' attitudes and behaviour have resulted from clear guidelines for managing behaviour and the introduction of a points system which the students value. The headteacher reviewed the off-site provision and introduced a robust system of quality assurance to hold external providers to account. The range of providers was reduced as a consequence, and now the centre is looking to expand it again in order to better accommodate students' preferences. Considerable staffing resources are deployed to support students in improving their attendance, behaviour and achievement. Attendance rose to start with but has slipped back again, and staff attribute this to the breakdown of a few off-site placements. However, there are too many persistent absentees, and although the education welfare service is involved in a more proactive way, this has not

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always been the case. Because of the temporary nature of their contracts, some teachers have left for other jobs, and this has left gaps in the curriculum, such as drama, which students miss. Nonetheless, those who attend enjoy what is provided for them. A strong feature is their feeling of safety. Students make a satisfactory contribution to the centre and wider communities. The extent to which they adopt healthy lifestyles is satisfactory. Students develop a sound awareness of the world of work and the majority go on to education or training when they leave. However, attendance is too low and a few students are not punctual. When this is added to the fact that many do not realise their academic potential, they are not adequately prepared for the demands of the workplace.

The current leaders have amply demonstrated that there is capacity to improve. The improvement plan identifies all the right priorities and targets, although the timescales are not quite ambitious enough. Self-evaluation is growing as systems to measure academic gains, behaviour and attendance are developed and embedded, and there are plans to analyse the performance of different groups. Parents' views are sought at reviews, and further canvassing is planned for the new year. To date, there has been no evaluation of the provision for students at risk of exclusion from mainstream schools. The local authority has recently provided an assurance that recruitment of permanent staff will commence in January and their target is to have a permanent staff in place by Easter 2010. Given this assurance, the centre has the capacity to sustain the improvements made.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Secure greater stability in staffing by Easter 2010.
- Raise attendance so that it compares favourably with that in similar units and is close to the average for secondary schools within three years.
- Improve teaching and learning so that students' progress accelerates significantly by:
 - making sure that students arrive punctually to all lessons
 - identifying clearly the knowledge, skills and understanding that students are intended to acquire by the end of each lesson
 - showing clearly in planning the role of adults in supporting learning and behaviour in lessons
 - ensuring that staff have secure skills in managing students' behaviour
 - checking that students fully understand before moving on to more difficult work
 - involving students in reviewing their success in achieving the intended outcomes and linking this to the points system.
- Strengthen the capacity for further improvement by:
 - adjusting timescales in the improvement plan so that targets are more challenging

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- making use of all the available information to evaluate outcomes, including attainment, progress, behaviour and attendance
- analysing the outcomes for different groups of students
- ensuring that all stakeholders' views are taken into account in evaluating the centre's work.

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

Progress during lessons is satisfactory and sometimes good. Students who attend said that they enjoy their learning. However, they are not making sufficient progress to fulfil their academic potential. In addition, too many students do not attend regularly enough. As a result, not enough are on track to make up for previous periods of lost learning. In lessons, students' attention is frequently engaged immediately with a practical starter or task they enjoy, such as a word-search of vocabulary associated with the topic. Late arrivals are usually apologetic and they are quickly briefed so that they can get on with their work. Students show a willingness to work individually, and occasionally help one another. They readily answer questions and most persevere with tasks. Work is generally presented neatly and students respond to feedback and improve their coursework. They are well motivated by frequent references to examination or coursework requirements, and they know how well they are doing in relation to their long-term goals. They are not as well informed about their progress in lessons, although they are keen to earn points for appropriate behaviour and attitudes. Students whose literacy skills are weak are well supported in lessons.

The 'postcode gang' culture that is a feature in some parts of the city is not tolerated, and students are adamant that they feel quite safe in the centre and at off-site settings. 'People at Unity are quite close, so when it comes to bullying it is not an issue' one remarked. They develop a secure understanding of how to keep themselves safe and healthy, and most choose healthy options while at the centre. Although they admit to some unhealthy habits at other times, a few give examples of how they have changed their lifestyles for the better. Students contribute their ideas for improvement, such as for their new common room; some carry out voluntary work with the elderly or young children, and all raise funds for charities of their choice. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. Students reflect on their own performance and improvements in their behaviour, and grow in self-esteem and self-control. They are polite and respectful towards visitors, although they do not always show respect for staff. Their behaviour improves during the time they are at the centre, and they recognise that there are different ways to behave in different situations. They show respect for the centre's environment and the codes of conduct at placements in the community. Students from different backgrounds get on well together and the centre is a cohesive community.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

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|---|----------|
| 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 | 2 |
| Pupils' behaviour | 3 |
| The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles | 3 |
| 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 | 4 |
| Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹ | 4 |
| The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development | 3 |

How effective is the provision?

The centre accurately assesses students' attainment on arrival. The information is used effectively to place students on courses that offer an appropriate challenge, and to identify those who need additional support from agencies such as the behaviour and autism support teams. Staff work closely with representatives from Connexions, the Youth Offending Team and the mental health services. Each student has a good quality personal education plan. Students and their parents are involved in regular reviews of the plans. A system for monitoring students' progress has recently been introduced, and is to be used to ascertain those on track to reach their personal targets, and to identify those who need further support or intervention.

The curriculum provides a satisfactory range of learning experiences, adequately matched to students' ages, needs and abilities. Almost all students have the required 25 hours of education each week. If not, they build up to this gradually. There is a suitable emphasis on literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology, science and personal, social and health education (PSHE) and all courses lead to accreditation at Levels 1 or 2. There is an increasing number of full GCSE courses, such as in science and art. The range of vocational providers ensures that students have a reasonable choice, for instance in hair and beauty, sports studies and engineering; most preferences can be satisfied. For students who spend half their time at the college, the addition of a 'well-being afternoon' has been a great hit. This includes outdoor and

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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adventurous activities in the community. However, a minority of those who attend off-site placements do not have access to physical activities and the centre is addressing this. The PSHE programme encourages the development of self-awareness, promotes understanding of healthy lifestyles and diversity and includes careers education and guidance.

There are good arrangements for admissions and supporting the few who make the move back to school. Pastoral support is effectively coordinated by an assistant headteacher, and personal contact with achievement managers and learning mentors adds to students' feelings of security and being valued. There are some minor inconsistencies in the recording of incidents of poor behaviour. For some students, the interventions by this team have resulted in significant improvements in attendance, although whole-centre attendance remains stubbornly low. More pro-active involvement of the local authority's education welfare service has recently been secured.

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 |
| The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships | 3 |
| The effectiveness of care, guidance and support | 3 |

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher has communicated high expectations to staff. Staff show a clear commitment to the students and to improvement. Self-evaluation, combined with an understanding of good secondary practice, have enabled the headteacher and staff to identify the right steps to take to secure improvement. A suitable range of actions has been taken to promote community cohesion, including curriculum topics designed to celebrate diversity and encourage tolerance. Racist incidents are rare. The centre has schemes to promote gender, race and disability equality. Although it does not yet have sufficient data on outcomes to check that all groups do equally well, the improvement plan shows that analysis of the performance of different groups is planned. Innovative and robust systems have been developed to assure the quality of off-site provision. Guidance for staff, the use of consultants from the local authority and monitoring of lessons have combined effectively to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

The management committee meets its delegated responsibilities satisfactorily. Although the committee is short of parent representatives, it has strong representation from external agencies that are routinely involved with students at the centre, so members visit as part of their professional roles and know well the strengths and challenges faced by the centre. The creation of sub-committees is enabling members to develop their roles in holding the centre to account.

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There are secure arrangements for safeguarding students, including good risk assessments for individuals and activities that occur off site. Child protection awareness training is provided for all staff and more formal training arranged for those who are permanent or on long-term contracts. All staff are vetted before starting at the centre, and suitable assurances obtained from agencies who supply temporary staff.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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|--|----------|
| 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 | 3 |
| The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being | 3 |
| The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination | 3 |
| The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures | 3 |
| 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

There was a very low return of questionnaires. Inspectors supplemented this information by looking at views expressed by parents in written records of personal education plan review meetings. Parents are generally positive about what the centre provides. They are kept informed through newsletters and progress reports and invited individually to express their views at review meetings.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Unity Learning 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 four completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 133 pupils registered at the centre.

| Statements | Strongly Agree | | Agree | | Disagree | | Strongly disagree | |
|---|----------------|----|-------|-----|----------|----|-------------------|---|
| | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % |
| My child enjoys school | 1 | 25 | 3 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| The school keeps my child safe | 0 | 0 | 4 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| The school informs me about my child's progress | 0 | 0 | 3 | 75 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| My child is making enough progress at this school | 0 | 0 | 3 | 75 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| The teaching is good at this school | 0 | 0 | 2 | 50 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| The school helps me to support my child's learning | 1 | 25 | 2 | 50 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle | 0 | 0 | 2 | 50 | 2 | 50 | 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) | 0 | 0 | 3 | 75 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| The school meets my child's particular needs | 0 | 0 | 2 | 50 | 2 | 50 | 0 | 0 |
| The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour | 0 | 0 | 3 | 75 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns | 1 | 25 | 2 | 50 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| The school is led and managed effectively | 0 | 0 | 3 | 75 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school | 0 | 0 | 3 | 75 | 1 | 25 | 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

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| 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.



17 December 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Unity Learning Centre, Nottingham, NG7 4ES

Thank you for making us welcome in the centre and the other sites that we visited. A special thanks to those of you who showed us your work and talked about life at Unity. We were pleased to see how well you all get on together at Unity and to hear that you feel quite safe there. You said that you enjoy many of the activities. Some of you have improved your attendance since you started at the centre. We found that by Year 11 your behaviour is much improved. You contribute to the life of the centre by giving your ideas, such as about the new common room. Some of you do voluntary work and raise funds for charities. It was encouraging to hear about the positive changes that have been made in the past year.

We found that the teaching is satisfactory, and some of it is good. Many of you are capable of getting five or more good GCSE grades in examinations, yet not enough are on track to do this because you have previously fallen behind with your education or are not attending well enough. You need to make more rapid progress if you are going to reach your potential and have a better chance of succeeding in adult life and work. The teaching and your learning need to be good in every lesson for you to make better progress. Also, attendance needs to improve - you cannot make good progress if you do not attend regularly enough. We are also concerned about the number of staff who have temporary contracts even though they work hard and are committed to making the centre a better place. For these reasons, we have given the centre a 'notice to improve'. This means that inspectors will visit again soon to see how well things are going and the centre will have another inspection in about a year. The headteacher and staff have plans that show how they are going to develop the centre, but they need to make sure the target dates for improvement are earlier than they had originally planned. They are going to measure their successes in as many ways as possible and look at the different groups, such as boys and girls, to check that you are all doing equally well. We wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely

Mrs S Aldridge

Lead inspector

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