

Dee Banks School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111494
Local authority	Cheshire West and Chester
Inspection number	378310
Inspection dates	18–19 October 2011
Reporting inspector	Brian Padgett 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	2–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	67
Of which number on roll in the sixth form	12
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Rosie Beach
Headteacher	Raymond Elliott
Date of previous school inspection	3 March 2009
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one additional inspector. Eleven lessons were observed, taught by 8 different teachers. Meetings were held with staff, members of the governing body, a therapist and a parent. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at school documentation, including school policies, teachers' plans, pupils' individual education plans, performance data and material relating to safeguarding. The responses to Ofsted questionnaires from 31 staff and 34 parents and carers were analysed.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- How well the school is adapting to new challenges.
- How well pupils¹ are prepared for life after school.
- The assessment of progress for each group of pupils.
- How effectively pupils' behaviour is managed, especially pupils with autism.
- The effectiveness of partnership work.

Information about the school

Dee Banks is a special school for children and young people between the ages of two and 19 who have severe and complex special educational needs and/or disabilities. The majority of pupils have one of three conditions: profound and multiple learning difficulties; severe learning difficulties; or autistic spectrum disorder. However, several pupils have learning difficulties across these categories and/or other conditions, such as a physical disability.

Most of the pupils are boys; about one third are girls. Nearly all are of White British heritage. Around a third are known to be eligible for free school meals. Pupils generally live within Cheshire West and Chester, although a small number travel from neighbouring local authorities. Two pupils are in the care of the local authority. Six spend part of their school week in Dee Banks and part in a mainstream school.

The school has specialist status for communication and interaction.

¹ The school provides for children (up to 5 years), pupils (up to the end of Key Stage 2) and students (from Key Stage 3 onwards). In this all-age school, the term 'pupils' is used for conciseness throughout the report, unless specifically referring to the Early Years Foundation Stage (children) or the sixth form (students).

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?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

Dee Banks continues to provide an outstanding quality of education for pupils of all ages with severe and complex special educational needs and/or disabilities. It is outstanding in many respects, not least in the care, commitment and dedication of staff to supporting pupils and their families. It has the wholehearted confidence of parents and carers, its partner schools, and of the many health professionals involved with therapy.

There is a very wide range of learning needs to be met, academic and social, and all connected by the need to learn how to communicate and interact. The school has built considerable expertise in the effective teaching of young people with a wide range of special educational needs and/or disabilities, especially those with communication and interaction difficulties. Under one roof can be found expertise in teaching pupils who productively spend part of their time in mainstream schools, to expertise in teaching those pupils with the most debilitating of conditions for whom the slightest sensory response represents progress. The school is increasingly effective in providing for pupils at the most severe end of the autistic spectrum, to the extent that the school has had success with such pupils admitted from other special schools. Many pupils make outstanding progress in relation to their starting points and reach their full potential. This progress can take many forms: in learning basic skills; in learning life skills; and in their knowledge and understanding of the world. For many pupils, progress is measured in very small steps.

Dee Banks is an exciting place to learn. The curriculum is tailored to be highly relevant to pupils' needs. Pupils are frequently out learning in the community and with pupils from mainstream schools. The school has International School Status with a particularly strong connection with Germany; pupils learn the German language and visit Germany. Food and its preparation are an important part of the curriculum, as are music and singing. The school is well resourced; for example, it has its own swimming pool, soft play area and sensory rooms. Pupils enjoy themselves as they learn useful skills and communicate.

The school is exceptionally fortunate in its leaders and managers. They are very experienced and leadership is delegated well, within the senior team and within middle management, so there is strength of leadership in depth. The governing body also brings many professional skills to bear. A half of governors are parents, who have an intimate knowledge of the school's day-to-day working. Equality is promoted

extremely well and no discrimination is tolerated. Safeguarding and child protection procedures are particularly rigorous, necessarily so, as pupils are generally very vulnerable. The school can demonstrate clear improvement since the last inspection; for example, in its enhanced analysis of performance, an aspect that is beginning to be implemented by teachers within classes to focus learning more sharply. Leaders have a clear sense of what to develop further and are receptive to new ideas, such as improving the quality of outdoor provision for the youngest children. Based on its track record, the school has excellent potential to improve even further.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further develop the teachers' use of performance-data analyses to inform target-setting in pupils' individual education plans and lesson planning.
- Develop the outdoor area for the youngest pupils, providing them with more opportunities to learn outdoors, especially to explore the natural world.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

Pupils of all categories of need make outstanding progress. Levels of attainment achieved by pupils vary widely. Attainment is very low, often remaining at the lowest levels of cognitive development for some pupils with the most profound and multiple learning needs. Others, with less severe learning needs and/or disabilities, reach the lower levels of the National Curriculum, learn to read and write and be numerate, and consequently join their peers in mainstream for some lessons and activities. Pupils on the autistic spectrum pose particular challenges, not least in their often very challenging behaviour. With this group of pupils, too, remarkable progress is seen, especially in their ability to manage their behaviour, to socialise and communicate with others.

Pupils enjoy coming to school. Their attendance is above the average for mainstream secondary schools. There is very little unauthorised absence, although pupils are occasionally absent for medical reasons. Within the realm of personal development and life skills, pupils achieve exceptionally well, as a response to exceptional provision. Generally, pupils feel safe. However, the very nature of many pupils' difficulties and disabilities prevents staff and pupils feeling completely safe at all times and makes this a slightly weaker aspect. Staff and pupils must remain vigilant about unexpected and eccentric behaviour. Through sport, physical education and a consistent focus on healthy eating, pupils gain experience of and appreciate what constitutes a healthy lifestyle. Throughout the school, economic awareness is fostered through enterprise projects where, having raised funding, pupils then decide how to spend the proceeds, often giving freely to charities. Pupils have a clear voice in decision-making through the school council. Sixth-formers take active roles of responsibility around school as part of their 'internal' work experience. Apart from their work in supporting charities and good causes, Dee Banks pupils are involved within the Chester community in a number of activities that bring them in contact with the public, such as a well-regarded Samba band, and appearances in the Chester Mystery Plays. Pupils' cultural development is excellent. Their knowledge of German puts them at an advantage with many pupils from other schools and the

school's close links with South Africa help them appreciate lives in other parts of the world. In a nutshell, they make excellent progress all round and their outstanding personal development is part of this progress.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

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

How effective is the provision?

For parents and carers, many of whom wrote to the inspection team in glowing terms, the essence of the school for them is the devotion of staff to meeting the needs of their children. The care, support and guidance for pupils are exceptional. This is because the dedication of staff can be seen at all levels: in leaders; in teachers; in teaching assistants; and in all support staff. It is, perhaps, best seen each morning when children are so warmly welcomed into school. Apart from school staff, the school is also the hub for many health staff and therapists who support the pupils' medical needs on site. They are fully integrated into school life, regularly visiting lessons, for example, thus enhancing the care for pupils.

The majority of teaching observed was of good quality. Teaching of outstanding effectiveness was seen with each of the main categories of need and across all age groups. The hallmarks of the good and outstanding teaching seen were excellent knowledge and understanding of pupils' learning needs, exceptional teamwork between teachers and teaching assistants (the latter playing an absolutely vital role with pupils), the good use of technology, and careful planning for individual needs based on pupils' individual education plans. Leaders have developed the use of up-to-date analyses of pupils' performance in comparison to others with similar needs. The teachers are beginning to use these to track their pupils' progress in detail and use the information to set increasingly precise targets. This work is at an early stage. Teachers and support staff were positive, firm, patient and persistent with pupils and pupils responded well, in the context of their different conditions and disabilities.

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

* In some special schools inspectors do not make a judgement about attainment in relation to expectations of the pupils' age.

The school provides pupils with an exciting curriculum. It is skilfully adapted from the curriculum for mainstream schools, and retains the focus on teaching the skills of literacy and numeracy and of personal and social development. Ever present are methods and strategies for staff to communicate with pupils and for pupils to interact with staff. For example, staff are expert in using picture communication with pupils with autism. There is an emphasis on sensory experience to promote responses from pupils. Staff are creative and innovative in motivating pupils. For example, the use of music and song and the deployment of a large coloured parachute considerably enlivened a German language lesson. In a lesson for pupils with the most profound and complex needs, staff tried out new boards on which pupils were laid, 'resonance' boards, to increase their experience of sound and vibration and elicit a response. Teachers often plan visits out of school. Within the premises, frequent use is made of the swimming pool, with good results for pupils who otherwise experience little mobility. On a grander scale altogether, some pupils make the journey to Germany, by air, for an extended residential visit to a partner school in that country.

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
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

Leaders and managers have successfully maintained the vision for the school and the drive for further improvement since the previous inspection. Senior leaders form a strong, complementary team, with expertise in all areas of leadership and management. The school has an open and welcoming ethos and runs smoothly and efficiently. Equality is promoted exceptionally well; staff are accessible to all pupils and treat them with respect. Opportunities to tackle discrimination occur naturally, and pupils generally work very well together, respecting each other's rights.

Management responsibilities are delegated effectively, so that there is leadership for all groups of pupils and for all key stages. The work of the school is monitored well, so senior staff and the governing body have an accurate view of the school to inform self-evaluation and with which to develop new plans.

Policies and procedures to safeguard pupils, for child protection, for risk assessment and for health, safety and well-being, on and off the premises, are extremely rigorous, going above and beyond those for most mainstream schools, reflecting the vulnerability of the pupils. However, because of the unpredictable and sometimes volatile nature of pupils' responses and behaviour, especially of those pupils with severe autism, a degree of risk of harm is ever present. Staff are ever vigilant. The school has developed outstanding communication and information links with parents and carers that overcome the problems caused by the distance between the school and most families. Parents and carers are fully involved in their child's education; for example, with annual reviews and target-setting. Equally, the school's links with other mainstream schools, secondary and primary, are exemplary. As a consequence, there is joint working that facilitates some pupils benefiting from the opportunities at

two schools. Furthermore, as the headteacher is a local leader in education, mainstream schools have ready access to advice and support about pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Community cohesion is promoted outstandingly well, at local, national and international level, and evaluated rigorously as part of Dee Banks’s status as an International School. Overall, in view of the school’s outstanding effectiveness, it provides exceptional value for money.

These are the grades for the leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
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	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Early Years Foundation Stage

Young children with special educational needs and/or disabilities get off to a terrific start in the mixed Early Years/Key Stage 1 class. At the heart of the Early Years Foundation Stage is excellent leadership, very good teamwork and a staff who know each child and their needs exceptionally well. Records indicate children consistently make above-average progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage, albeit in small steps from generally very low starting points. Children’s activities are a mixture of opportunities for structured play, very often of a sensory nature, and group sessions; for example, sharing stories and singing together. The curriculum is well adapted to children’s needs and teaching is very accomplished at encouraging children with a huge range of learning needs and disabilities. Communication with parents and carers is excellent, including, for example, two-way daily records and weekly summaries of the children’s progress. Equally effective partnership working with local primary schools enables a proportion of children to gain from the specialist support within Dee Banks and from spending part of their school week within their local community school. Resources are of good quality, with the exception of the outdoor area, which lacks natural features. Leaders are aware of this and compensate as best they can by frequent visits out of school; for example, to nearby Delamere Forest.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation stage	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The effectiveness of leadership and management in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1

Sixth form

Nearly all the young people in Key Stage 4 move into the sixth form, although a small number of them remain in other classes, such as those with the most profound learning difficulties and disabilities. Students enjoy their years in the sixth form, with its clear emphasis on preparing them for a fulfilling and independent life, including continuing education. In many ways, the school becomes more of a home base as students are frequently out of school on work experience, within the community, or on mainstream school and college placements. They study life skills through first-hand, practical experiences. They receive expert guidance from staff and outside consultants. Whatever their special educational needs and/or disabilities, nearly all try for accreditation in a wide range of practical skills. Food is a very important part of the curriculum for the students, as they learn to shop, prepare, cook and serve meals. Their achievements are considerable, as inspectors found when the students served them a lunch of high quality, with impeccable social skills, during the inspection. The sixth form is extremely well led, with passion and skill, and served by an experienced and dedicated team of teacher and teaching assistants. Unfortunately, students' education and achievements in the previous year were disrupted by the absence of key staff. However, the sixth form has now the capacity for a full recovery.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth Form	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

Views of parents and carers

Virtually all of the responses and comments from parents and carers were entirely positive. They commented in particular about how happy their children are at the school, the very high quality of care provided by all staff and how well the school supports and involves them. Several wrote movingly about their appreciation of a staff that never give up trying to stimulate and motivate their children, regardless of the severity of their learning difficulties.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Dee Banks 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 inspection team received 34 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 67 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	28	82	6	18	0	0	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	29	85	5	15	0	0	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	30	88	3	9	1	3	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	27	79	7	21	0	0	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	31	91	3	9	0	0	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	27	79	5	15	1	3	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	25	74	7	21	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)	24	71	9	26	0	0	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	32	94	1	3	1	3	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	27	79	6	18	1	3	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	30	88	4	12	0	0	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	28	82	5	15	1	3	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	30	88	4	12	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 all 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	43	47	10	0
Primary schools	6	46	42	6
Secondary schools	14	36	41	9
Sixth forms	15	42	41	3
Special schools	30	48	19	3
Pupil referral units	14	50	31	5
All schools	10	44	39	6

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 2010 to 08 April 2011 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 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. Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

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 pupils' 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.



20 October 2011

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Dee Banks School, Chester, CH3 5UX

You may remember when inspectors visited your school recently. We wanted to see how well you were learning. I am writing this letter to you to tell you what we found out and about our conclusions. First, I must thank you for making us welcome at Dee Banks. We thoroughly enjoyed meeting you and seeing you learn.

The last time an inspector visited, in 2009, he judged the school to be in Ofsted's top category: an outstanding school. I am pleased to say we believe Dee Banks continues to be 'outstanding'. An outstanding school makes sure that its pupils reach their potential; it cares for them and makes life interesting for them. Dee Banks does all these things for each one of you. Behind the scenes, staff work very closely with your parents and carers and they carefully coordinate a whole host of other people whose job it is to ensure your well-being.

It was easy to see how much you enjoy school from the moment you arrived in your buses and taxis. I have never seen so many smiling faces or heard so many, 'Good Morning's!' From the youngest children in the Early Years/Key Stage 1 class identifying characters in their story, to Key Stage 2/3 pupils singing in German, to being entertained to a formal lunch by the sixth form, we were able to gain insights into your lives and learning at Dee Banks. These observations helped us appreciate just what an excellent school this is.

The staff never give up helping you to learn and communicate. They keep trying to make things better still. They ask you what you think and you are direct in telling them. It is hard to think of ways of making Dee Banks better than it already is. We encouraged teachers to continue to use numerical information about your progress when they review your work, and we hope, in time, the youngest pupils will be able to have easier access to their own outdoor area, full of trees and natural things to explore: a mini Delamere Forest!

We left the school with happy memories.

On behalf of the inspectors, I wish you all the very best for your futures.

Yours sincerely

Brian Padgett
Her Majesty's Inspector

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