

INSPECTION REPORT

ABBEY COURT SCHOOL

Strood, Rochester

LEA area: Medway

Unique reference number: 119052

Headteacher: Ms Karen Joy

Reporting inspector: Mrs Kathy Hooper
2971

Dates of inspection: 21st – 23rd October 2002

Inspection number: 249386

Short inspection carried out under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Type of school:	Community special
School category:	Maintained
Age range of pupils:	5 -19
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
School address:	Rede Court Road Strood Rochester Kent
Postcode:	ME2 3SP
Telephone number:	(01634) 338220
Fax number:	(01634) 338221
Appropriate authority:	The governing body
Name of chair of governors:	Mr Peter Castle
Date of previous inspection:	8 th – 12 th June 1998

INFORMATION ABOUT THE INSPECTION TEAM

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PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Abbey Court is a community special school for 120 pupils aged 5-19 with severe and profound learning difficulties and difficulties on the autistic spectrum. There are approximately twice as many boys as girls, as is the case nationally. At the time of the inspection there were five pupils in the reception class. In line with other similar schools nationally, the special educational needs of the younger pupils are more complex than those of the older pupils. About a quarter of the pupils are entitled to free school meals. There are 11 pupils from ethnic minority families, two of the pupils are from homes where English is an additional language. Although the families of the majority of pupils live within the LEA boundary, 15 of the older pupils live outside the area. Pupils are brought to school by bus and taxi. The socio-economic background of pupils does not affect their progress. All the pupils have statements of special educational need. Their attainment on entry to school is well below that expected nationally. It is inappropriate, therefore, to compare their attainment with national standards. The school operates on two sites, 12 miles apart. The reception and primary pupils occupy the Rainham site. The secondary pupils and post 16 students are taught on the Strood site.

HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS

Abbey Court is a confident and successful school that makes effective provision for its pupils. Pupils achieve well because the teaching and learning are very good. The teaching and learning of pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4 and for post 16 is better than that for younger pupils. Very good management encourages high teacher morale and enables the school to improve year on year.

What the school does well

- Pupils achieve well in the targets set for them.
- The teaching and learning are good throughout the school; they are very good in the secondary department.
- Leadership and management are very good and the school has made very good improvements in provision since the last inspection.
- Pupils enjoy coming to school; they behave very well and develop very good personal and social skills.
- The school provides excellent levels of care through the curriculum because of the contributions from therapists and outside agencies, the very close links with parents and the excellent quality of its accommodation.

What could be improved

- There are no significant issues for the school to address. It continually strives for further improvement.

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the action plan prepared by the appropriate authority.

HOW THE SCHOOL HAS IMPROVED SINCE ITS LAST INSPECTION

The school has made very good improvements since the last inspection. Schemes of work are now in place. These have been further developed to address the individual needs of pupils. Higher attaining pupils are well challenged. Provision for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties has been much improved. The school has continued to develop links with mainstream schools. It finds it increasingly difficult to meet their demands for professional training in a climate of teacher shortage. The accommodation is now excellent. The staff team has been strengthened and the senior management team has been effectively restructured.

STANDARDS

The table summarises inspectors' judgements about how well pupils achieve in relation to their individual targets.

Progress in:	By Year R	by Year 6	by Year 11	by Year 13	Key
speaking and listening	B	B	B	B	very good A
reading	B	B	B	B	good B
writing	B	B	B	B	satisfactory C
mathematics	B	B	B	B	unsatisfactory D
personal, social and health education	A	A	A	A	poor E
other personal targets set at annual reviews or in IEPs*	B	B	B	B	

* IEPs are individual education plans for pupils with special educational needs.

Pupils make good progress in the targets set for them throughout the school. Pupils enter the school with few social skills and little understanding of routines. Higher attaining pupils become increasingly confident and socially aware. They develop a good range of communication, number and information and communication technology skills. Pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties are involved in an increasing range of activities and experiences as they move through the school. Higher attaining students in the further education classes become sufficiently independent to take part in work experience. They achieve well in externally accredited courses.

PUPILS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	Very good. Pupils enjoy school.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	Very good. Pupils want to conform. Pupils with challenging behaviour make good progress in their behaviour programmes.
Personal development and relationships	Very good. Pupils develop increasing levels of confidence and social awareness.
Attendance	Good. Authorised absence is declining and unauthorised absence is improving. The changing school profile leads to more absences through sickness and treatment.

The very good attitudes, behaviour and personal relationships are consistent across the school's two sites. The school has created a harmonious and orderly ethos.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of pupils:	Years R - 6	Years 7 - 11	Years 12 - 13
Quality of teaching	Good	Very good	Very good

Inspectors make judgements about teaching in the range: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; unsatisfactory; poor; very poor. 'Satisfactory' means that the teaching is adequate and strengths outweigh weaknesses.

Overall, teachers meet pupils' individual learning needs very well. The teaching is good throughout the school. It is very good in the secondary department because there are more lessons where all the pupils are engaged throughout the whole lesson. The basic skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology are systematically reinforced across the curriculum. Opportunities are well used to promote pupils' personal, social and health education.

In the majority of lessons, there is a very good match between the activities presented to pupils and their particular learning needs. In some lessons, the teacher talks for too long at the expense of pupils being actively involved in tasks.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum.	Good. The curriculum has been appropriately modified to meet the needs of the pupils.
Provision for English as an additional language (EAL).	Good. Pupils whose parents' first language is not English make similar progress to that of other pupils.
Provision for pupils' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural, development.	Good. There is a comprehensive personal, social, health and citizenship programme and a good range of opportunities to develop social, moral, cultural and spiritual awareness.
How well the school cares for its pupils.	Excellent. There are very robust child protection procedures. Risk assessments are regularly carried out.

The curriculum meets statutory requirements. Pupils are grouped by ability in English and communication and in physical education. The more able pupils benefit from inclusion in booster classes in mathematics. The school has achieved national recognition by achieving awards for Careers Excellence, Artsmark Silver and the Healthy Schools, Basic Skills Quality Marks for primary, secondary and further education and Investors in People. It has recently achieved the Chartermark Award for Excellence.

The quality of care for pupils is outstanding. The very high standard of accommodation provides an enabling and safe environment. There are comprehensive behaviour plans for pupils with challenging behaviour. There are very good eating plans for those pupils with particular dietary needs. The school nursing team operates on both sites for the full week and there is a full-time music therapist, which is a valuable support to many pupils.

HOW WELL THE SCHOOL IS LED AND MANAGED

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff.	Very good. The headteacher provides very strong leadership and management and is well supported by the senior management team (SMT).
How well the appropriate authority fulfils its responsibilities.	Very good. The governing body is very effective and experienced and fulfils its statutory role very well.
The school's evaluation of its performance.	Very good. There is an impressive range of monitoring throughout the school.
The strategic use of resources.	Very good. The school makes very good use of its resources to improve provision.

Very strong leadership and management ensure that all those with management responsibilities have a clear understanding of their role. The governing body works closely with the school. Through visits and reports, governors keep abreast of developments. Principles of best value are regularly addressed. The school gives good value for money.

PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What parents would like to see improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their children enjoy school. • They would feel comfortable about approaching the school with a problem. • The leadership and management. • The school works closely with parents. • The good behaviour. • The good teaching. • Good information about their child's progress. • High expectations. • The help it gives to make pupils mature and responsible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The amount of homework. • Some parents were concerned about some transport arrangements.

The inspection team's findings agree with those of the parents in terms of its strengths. They found that the work the school expects pupils to do at home was appropriate. The school regularly raises the parents' concerns about transport with the LEA.

PART B: COMMENTARY

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

Pupils achieve well in the targets set for them.

1. Pupils achieve well and make good progress in meeting the targets set for them in English, mathematics, science and information and communication technology. They make very good progress in the development of personal and social skills.
2. Children who come into the reception class have a wide range of complex learning difficulties. However, since September, several of the children have made rapid progress. They are becoming more confident and relaxed within the clear framework set by adults. A child who had initially been unresponsive was able to initiate interactions with a visitor. A pupil with challenging behaviour due to difficulties on the autistic spectrum sat for a considerable length of time with the learning support assistant while interacting purposefully with a computer program.
3. By the end of Key Stage 1, pupils are developing good understanding and skills. For example, a higher attaining pupil was able to explain what a doctor did and that massaging feet helps to keep them warm. Pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties have a good range of experiences and they are developing increasing concentration. Higher attaining Key Stage 2 pupils are gaining a good grasp of numbers up to five, they sort objects into two categories with verbal support and recognise familiar names. Lower attaining pupils are developing increasingly good eye contact and they are beginning to respond to familiar situations.
4. By the end of Key Stage 3, pupils have increasing awareness of others. The higher attaining pupils develop a clear understanding of appropriate behaviour. One pupil was becoming aware that, in poetry, words rhyme. She could read familiar words of her poetry with support. A pupil with difficulties on the autistic spectrum attended long enough to plant some bulbs with very good support from the learning support assistant. Higher attaining Key Stage 4 pupils are able to read the time in half hours and add and subtract two single digit numbers. Several are working towards National Curriculum Level 1.
5. Post 16 students are developing good levels of independence. They are learning to write their home addresses accurately and recognise social signs, for example *Danger*. They are learning to order tasks and use money in everyday transactions, for example, paying bus fares when travelling on public transport. Pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties have good experiences of everyday objects, for example, handling electric tools with one-to-one support. One pupil smiled when his hand was guided to a switch linked to a tape recorder that played a message, "Hello everybody, I'm here today".

The teaching and learning are good throughout the school; they are very good in the secondary department.

6. The teaching overall is very good. It is of a consistently higher standard in classes for the older pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4 and for post-16. It was very good in lessons because all pupils demonstrated high levels of engagement.
7. In many lessons during the inspection there were outstanding features. Pupils' communication skills were very well developed and extended when teachers ensured good eye contact and used and taught correct signing. Pupils' understanding was very well supported when teachers used symbols or real objects to augment verbal interactions. Pupils' attention was better maintained in lessons where explanations were simple and well focused. The learning of pupils who have complex learning needs was accelerated when they were able to use a number of their senses to experience the activity. For example, pupils' understanding of music was very effectively supported by feeling and smelling crunchy autumn leaves.

8. In the best lessons, the pace was good because enjoyable and relevant activities, selected to reinforce the same concepts, were changed sufficiently frequently to maintain pupils' concentration and involvement, often for substantial lengths of time. The pupils clearly enjoyed the activities and showed this in their eye contact, body language and often through smiles and laughter. Non-verbal pupils were given every opportunity to make choices and their preferred method of indicating this was used. For example, some pupils used Big Macs with a pre-recorded message and others used symbols or signing. Teachers gave pupils time to respond and adults gave them their full attention in order to catch the often fleeting responses of those with the most complex needs. In this way, pupils were taught how to communicate and how to respond.
9. Teachers have very good understanding of the needs of pupils and are alert to ways of reinforcing individual targets, particularly those relating to communication, numeracy and social and personal development. There is very good encouragement of pupils, particularly the more able, to take responsibility for jobs. Individual social skills are consistently reinforced in different situations. For example, Key Stage 2 pupils were encouraged to look at the person they were greeting in the morning circle time.
10. In literacy and numeracy lessons, tasks are modified for different abilities to ensure that pupils have a successful outcome to their efforts. Learning is reinforced through other activities, for example, using an appropriate computer program to reinforce an understanding of number. There is a lot of repetition of key learning points during the lesson and at the end because lessons have been very clearly planned and sharply focused on individual learning outcomes. For example, in a movement session for pupils with profound and multiple difficulties, every pupil was engaged in an activity that was appropriate for their need. Despite the difficulties of movement, all the pupils clearly enjoyed the activities and their concentration and perseverance were excellent.
11. The learning support assistants are very competent and contribute to pupils' learning very well. Their talents were best used where they had a clear role in all parts of the lesson. There were many examples of learning support assistants working competently with small groups of pupils. They often work very effectively with individual pupils with challenging behaviour. In these situations, their calm and reassuring manner and their focused attention enabled the pupils to pay attention, respond and complete the task successfully. Thus their self-esteem was encouraged through learning how to co-operate.
12. In some lessons, the level of involvement of all pupils is not as high as it is in very good lessons. This is because teachers spend more time talking to pupils than involving them in direct experiences at an appropriate level. During this time, the learning support assistants are not directly involved in supporting pupils' learning except to encourage them to attend to the teacher. In some classes in the primary department, although the learning support assistants are well deployed, the comparatively large number of pupils with complex needs makes it more difficult to ensure the full engagement of all pupils throughout the lesson.
13. Signing and the use of symbols are not used consistently in all lessons. As a result, pupils without language are not always fully involved. However, those pupils who could benefit make insufficient use of communication aids and this limits the development of their communication skills. The school has a multi-sensory policy. However, this is mainly concerned with the use of the sensory room rather than how to enable pupils to learn through all their senses. There is no discrete teaching and learning policy to guide teachers in their planning and the selection of appropriate teaching strategies.

Leadership and management are very good and the school has made very good improvements in provision since the last inspection.

14. The leadership provided by the headteacher is very good. She and her senior management team have successfully established effective teams that work productively together and staff morale is high. There is a professional approach and commitment to high standards of provision. There are

clear aims. Very good relationships ensure that everyone is clear about their roles. There is a wide range of appropriate and clearly written policies. The monitoring systems are comprehensive and operate at all levels of the school. The outcomes are endorsed by external consultants. The school has been successful in achieving consistent implementation of policies across both sites. All co-ordinators are given sufficient time to monitor practice on both sites.

15. The school has made very good improvements since the last inspection. Schemes of work are in place for all subjects to inform teaching. Extensive building work has been accomplished with the minimum of disruption to pupils' learning. There is a consistent ethos across both sites. There is a comprehensive range of opportunities for inclusion of pupils in mainstream settings. Eight of the school's higher attaining pupils have been successfully integrated into the local school for moderate learning difficulties. Provision for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties has been strengthened. The school has made enormous and successful efforts to strengthen links with parents. Parents at their meeting were very appreciative of the level of their involvement in the education of their children. The school has recently achieved the Chartermark Award for excellence.
16. The governing body is very effective. The governors have a good understanding of the school through reports to their committees and frequent visits to the classroom. The range of expertise is very good and they have a very good understanding of their statutory duties. Financial management is very good and addresses the school's priorities. The school has been very effective in using resources from a variety of sources to enhance provision. Governors and the school have worked together to achieve excellent accommodation. Information and communication technology is used effectively both for administrative purposes and across the curriculum to enhance pupils' learning.
17. As is the case nationally, the school has had significant problems in recruiting teachers most of whom come with only mainstream experience. It invests heavily, therefore, in a comprehensive induction programme to support staff. The school reflects well on its use of the budget to achieve best value. The school gives good value for money.
18. The school has a comprehensive and innovative range of strategies to support recruitment. Nevertheless, it has been very difficult to appoint appropriate staff. The school is currently short of two teachers for pupils with difficulties on the autistic spectrum and the deputies teach for half the week on each site. Although there is a good complement of learning support assistants, the classes for the younger pupils with increasingly complex needs in the primary department are much larger than those in the secondary department. The classes in the primary school are much larger than class sizes for other similar schools nationally. The quality of teaching and learning observed in the primary department was not as good overall as it was in the secondary department.

Pupils enjoy coming to school; they behave very well and develop very good personal and social skills.

19. Pupils are clearly pleased to come to school. They express great enjoyment in their involvement in activities. Their self-esteem is clearly strengthened when they complete tasks successfully and receive due praise for their efforts. For example, when discovering he could turn a switch on and off with his elbow, a post-16 student reacted with great pleasure and a student with profound and multiple learning difficulties explained that he had turned a light on and off by pressing a switch. Pupils who gain increased control over their environment are stimulated to persevere for often lengthy periods, for example, when a Key Stage 2 pupil with profound and multiple learning difficulties held a die above her head.
20. Some higher attaining pupils display care and concern for their peers, especially those who are less able than themselves. A Key Stage 2 pupil smiled repeatedly at a pupil in a wheelchair to get him to smile back and succeeded. Lunchtimes are very sociable and relaxed occasions due to the high quality of adult support and interaction. Pupils develop very good social skills. For

example, a Key Stage 3 pupil who had accidentally damaged some property belonging to another pupil was able to apologise. Behaviour is very good. Those with challenging behaviour are well supported, through the use of behaviour programmes, to make very good progress in becoming more sociable.

21. Those pupils who are most able develop some measure of independence by carrying out tasks, such as taking the register to the office and helping to clear up at the end of the lesson. The recent introduction of a school council enables pupils to develop further responsibility.

The school provides excellent levels of care through the curriculum, the support of therapists and outside agencies, links with parents and the quality of its accommodation.

22. The school's attention to the health and wellbeing of pupils is excellent. The commitment and dedication of staff are outstanding. There are very good child protection procedures and these are well understood by all staff. Pupils' dignity is respected at all times.
23. The beginnings and ends of the day are well planned and valuable occasions. Break times and lunchtimes add significantly to the development of pupils' personal and social skills. The school has achieved the Healthy Eating Award. Feeding programmes are well executed and monitored. Lunchtime activities and clubs provide purposeful activities to maintain pupils' involvement. There is explicit emphasis on teaching pupils about personal care. The health and safety procedures are excellent and consistently observed across both sites.
24. There is a full-time music therapist who is also the music co-ordinator. Approximately a quarter of the pupils benefit from music therapy, for example, by helping pupils to come to terms with their disability. The nursing team contributes extensively to the health education programme. They work with staff to carry out feeding procedures and administer medical treatments as appropriate. The staff work very closely with the speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and occupational therapist. Termly meetings of professionals are held to address the particular needs of pupils as they arise.
25. The school has developed a range of strategies to strengthen the partnership with parents. As a consequence, attendance at annual reviews has risen from 51 to 77 per cent over three years. Annual surveys of parents' opinions are analysed and issues included in the school development plan. At their meeting with inspectors, parents were fulsome in their appreciation of the value the school placed on their knowledge of their children.
26. The accommodation is excellent. The very high quality of the environment makes a clear statement about the very high standards of care. The school building is bright, spacious and attractive. Great care has been given to the design and layout in order to meet the needs of pupils. Courtyards and play spaces have been imaginatively laid out to provide a range of sensory experiences. The building is maintained to a very high level. Displays are plentiful and designed to appeal to pupils.

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

There are no significant issues for the school to address. However, to improve even further, the governors and senior management team might wish to consider the following issues:

- (i) ensure all teaching is of an equally high standard in all lessons by developing and monitoring the effect of a discrete teaching and learning policy that guides teachers on multi-sensory approaches, the consistent use of signing and symbols and the wider use of communication aids;

(paragraphs 12, 13)

- (ii) with the local education authority, continue to pursue the recruitment of additional teaching staff to reduce the numbers in classes in the primary department.

(paragraph 18)

PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed

47

Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and pupils

18

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

	Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very poor
Number	1	15	19	12	0	0	0
Percentage	2	32	40	26	0	0	0

The table gives the number and percentage of lessons observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about teaching. Care should be taken when interpreting these percentages as each lesson represents more than two percentage points.

Information about the school's pupils

Pupils on the school's roll

No of pupils

Number of pupils on the school's roll

120

Number of full-time pupils known to be eligible for free school meals

31

English as an additional language

No of pupils

Number of pupils with English as an additional language

2

Pupil mobility in the last school year

No of pupils

Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission

6

Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving

5

Attendance

Authorised absence

	%
School data	9.39

Unauthorised absence

	%
School data	0.03

Both tables give the percentage of half days (sessions) missed through absence for the latest complete reporting year.

Ethnic background of pupils

Categories used in the Annual School Census
White – British
White – Irish
White – any other White background
Mixed – White and Black Caribbean
Mixed – White and Black African
Mixed – White and Asian
Mixed – any other mixed background
Asian or Asian British - Indian
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani
Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi
Asian or Asian British – any other Asian background
Black or Black British – Caribbean
Black or Black British – African
Black or Black British – any other Black background
Chinese
Any other ethnic group
No ethnic group recorded

Exclusions in the last school year

No of pupils on roll	Number of fixed period exclusions	Number of permanent exclusions
105	0	0
0	0	0
3	0	0
0	0	0
0	0	0
0	0	0
0	0	0
1	0	0
0	0	0
1	0	0
0	0	0
0	0	0
1	0	0
4	0	0
0	0	0
4	0	0
0	0	0

The table gives the number of exclusions, which may be different from the number of pupils excluded.

Teachers and classes

Qualified teachers and classes: R –Y13

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	12
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	9:1
Average class size	9.9

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Education support staff: R – Y13

Total number of education support staff	39
Total aggregate hours worked per week	1,272

Financial information

Financial year	2001-2002
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	£
Total income	1,332,189
Total expenditure	1,311,573
Expenditure per pupil	11,404.98
Balance brought forward from previous year	245,597
Balance carried forward to next year	266,213

Recruitment of teachers

Number of teachers who left the school during the last two years	5
Number of teachers appointed to the school during the last two years	5
Total number of vacant teaching posts (FTE)	1
Number of vacancies filled by teachers on temporary contract of a term or more (FTE)	1
Number of unfilled vacancies or vacancies filled by teachers on temporary contract of less than one term (FTE)	0

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Results of the survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out	120
Number of questionnaires returned	54

Percentage of responses in each category

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school.	80	20	0	0	0
My child is making good progress in school.	57	39	0	0	4
Behaviour in the school is good.	67	25	2	0	6
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.	26	38	10	12	14
The teaching is good.	68	30	0	0	2
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.	68	30	2	0	0
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.	81	19	0	0	0
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.	66	25	4	0	5
The school works closely with parents.	74	22	4	0	0
The school is well led and managed.	79	15	0	0	6
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.	64	22	2	0	12
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.	50	25	2	2	21

Summary of parents' and carers' responses

The majority of parents were very happy with the school. The findings of the inspection team supported the parents' perceptions in all but one aspect. The work that pupils are required to do at home was found to be appropriate. Those parents who attended the parents' meeting were aware of their child's targets and knew how to help them to work towards meeting them.