



Inspection report

Hillside Special School

**Better
education
and care**

Unique Reference Number 113648
LEA Plymouth
Inspection number 274776
Inspection dates 3 and 4 May 2005
Reporting inspector Ms B Cusdin HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996 and was deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act.

Type of School	Special	School address	Bodmin Road
School category	Community		Whiteleigh
Age range of pupils	11 to 16 years		Plymouth
			Devon
			PL5 4DZ
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01752 773 875
Number on roll	97	Fax number	01752 775 761
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mr M Thomas
Date of previous inspection	June 2003	Headteacher	Mr C Edwards

Age group	Published	Reference no.
11 to 16 years	10 June 2005	274776

Introduction

When Hillside Special School was inspected in June 2003, it was judged to require special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education. Her Majesty's Inspectors of schools (HMI) subsequently visited the school on three occasions to monitor its progress, and re-inspected the school in May 2005.

Description of the school

Hillside Special School serves pupils who have a Statement of Special Educational Need for moderate, emotional and behavioural learning difficulties. Some of the pupils travel long distances from Plymouth and the surrounding area. Approximately three quarters of the pupils are boys and one quarter girls. The vast majority of pupils are from a white British background. There are no pupils learning English as an additional language. Many pupils come from circumstances that are disadvantaged both socially and economically. The school experienced considerable turbulence in staffing prior to the June 2003 inspection and there have been further changes, including at the senior level, subsequently. At the time of this inspection, the deputy headteacher had been absent for a few weeks. Many of the Year 9 pupils were sitting national end-of-key-stage tests. The Year 11 pupils had returned to school the week before, following a period of work experience.

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Overall effectiveness of the school

In accordance with section 14 of the School Inspections Act 1996, I am of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures, since it is now providing an acceptable standard of education for its pupils.

The provision at the school is good. Many pupils are proud of their achievements and attitudes were good in most of the lessons. The pupils recognise the right ways to behave. They are making satisfactory progress and in some areas they achieve particularly well. There are appropriate strategies to improve the pupils' literacy skills but, rightly, improving literacy standards remains a top priority. At Key Stage 3, many pupils are successfully included in national end-of-key-stage assessments. The Key Stage 4 curriculum includes vocational experiences and the pupils have suitable access to award-bearing courses. The quality of teaching is good overall and there is some practice which is very effective. The senior team has led the school very well this year. Its four members have a range of strengths between them. Management skills are developing well. The database for monitoring student performance devised by the school is potentially very useful.

Improvement since the last inspection

There has been very good improvement since the last inspection. The significant challenges in the last school year, including changes in staffing and staff absence, have been overcome. Progress this year has been impressive. The hard work of the staff has been channelled productively into improving the relevance of the curriculum, making school experiences more active and more fun, and helping the pupils to become more independent.

Capacity to improve

The school's capacity to improve is good. Initially the school concentrated sensibly on the most urgent issues within the widespread weaknesses that existed two years ago. Given the nature of the school, workable solutions were not always easy to find. Nevertheless, the staff persevered, adapting and developing ideas to best suit the needs of their school. The senior team and governors are aware of areas that require further development.

What the school should do to improve further

The school's improvement plan accurately identifies the key priorities, which are to:

- consolidate strategies to raise standards, paying particular attention to improving the pupils' literacy skills;
- continue to develop management skills, especially those that will enable senior and middle managers to evaluate the effectiveness of the provision.

Achievement and standards

The pupils made at least satisfactory progress in all lessons. They made significant strides forward in over half of them picking up the key terms securely and demonstrating a good understanding of the ideas being taught. Progress in the mathematics lessons was good. In particularly effective lessons in geography and food technology, many pupils thoughtfully raised questions and they realised that what they had learned would be really useful.

Weak literacy skills can present a barrier to learning but the staff and pupils are working to overcome these difficulties with some success. A programme of speech and language support is under way for particular pupils. Some pupils participate in small-group work aimed at developing reading skills and all have access to computer training in basic skills, housed in the attractive school library. Rightly, the staff are planning to teach reading in a structured way to all pupils in need of such teaching. Moreover, they are looking for ways to ensure that all pupils have regular opportunities to read to an adult in school during the course of the week.

In the 2004 national end-of-key-stage tests, 14 pupils achieved Level 3 or higher in mathematics and four reached Level 4 or higher. At Key Stage 4, results in mathematics were also good with four pupils achieving a GCSE pass. In 2005, more Year 9 pupils have been entered for the national tests in mathematics and some have been entered for science as well. There are increased opportunities this year for the Key Stage 4 pupils to study courses that lead to recognised qualifications.

Personal development

The pupils are pleased that their efforts are acknowledged through the school's 'learn to earn' scheme. Typically in the lessons, the pupils paid attention and they worked constructively on tasks with other pupils and staff. In the most effective lessons, the pupils relished humorous approaches and they were very interested in the topic under discussion.

Around the school, the pupils behaved sensibly. The lunchtime arrangements ran smoothly. There is a calm ethos in the dining room and healthy eating is actively promoted. Encouragingly, the pupils have taken on responsibility for organising some improvements that they wanted, following discussions at the school council. Many pupils were very welcoming to visitors. The group of pupils that were interviewed talked confidently about their contributions to school life.

The staff collaborate well to promote good behaviour and positive attitudes to learning. Appropriately, several pupils withdrew from lessons, accompanied by teaching assistants, before their negative attitudes had escalated; all successfully returned later in the lesson and participated fully thereafter. The learning support unit is playing a key role in helping the pupils to manage their behaviour better and to attend school full-time. The unit provides a useful respite from the complexities of classroom life, yet demands continued learning. The school has worked constructively to ease the transition for pupils capable of

re-integrating into mainstream schools. Currently four pupils in Key Stage 3 are productively engaged in this process.

The pupils recognise the right ways to behave and know what action will be taken if they misbehave. The 'bottom line' system spells this out clearly to all. From September to end of March this year, there have been 80 fixed-term exclusions and one permanent, virtually the same numbers as the year before.

The attendance rate between September and December rose to 87 per cent and unauthorised absence reduced to 1.7 per cent, showing an improvement on the year before. However, the figures for the period January to end of March did not increase and attendance remains below the school's target figure. A family liaison worker has just started working at the school and is forging links with the parents and carers in order to minimise barriers to improving attendance.

The school is developing a co-ordinated programme of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Already there are good opportunities for social and moral development. There is a good range of clubs, educational visits and visitors to the school.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching was good or better in two thirds of the lessons; it was very good in food technology and mathematics, and excellent in geography. In the most effective lessons, ideas were developed skilfully, active responses were promoted and learning was fun. Overall, lessons were planned purposefully, driving towards clear learning outcomes. The staff managed behaviour well; they encouraged the pupils to participate fully and showed genuine pleasure when the pupils persevered and succeeded.

The school has made significant improvements to the pupils' individual education plans. The plans are informative and concise, with appropriate targets that constructively support the pupils' personal and social development. At the beginning of most lessons, the staff made sure that the pupils remembered their individual targets and they helped the pupils to review their own progress at the end of the lesson. The monitoring of individual education plans is very thorough.

The school's actions to improve the quality and impact of assessment are increasingly effective. The termly reports sent to parents and carers are comprehensive and communicate what the pupil needs to improve. The headteacher's annual reviews of the pupils' Statements of Special Educational Needs make good links between the teachers' reports on the pupils' progress and the targets set for the next period. The school's database, where assessments in each subject for each pupil are recorded regularly, enables the senior managers to highlight any pupil who is underachieving and discuss with staff ways to tackle the problems. Information from a recent audit of literacy provision has been used to tailor support to the needs of different subject areas.

Leadership and management

The senior team has introduced well-reasoned initiatives, which are settling into useful systems and productive practice. Some of the initiatives are innovative, such as the DVD which acts as an interactive handbook, providing instant and useful information for the staff. Creative strategies to ease the transition from primary school to secondary are designed to motivate the pupils and help them settle into their new school more speedily. The transition from Year 9 to Key Stage 4 and beyond is being tackled earlier and sensibly the school is seeking ways to offer subjects at Key Stage 4 which will capitalise on the pupils' interests and aspirations.

Careful thought, widespread research and sustained effort has culminated in the school's new database. As the data accumulates over time, senior and middle managers should be in a strong position to evaluate the standards achieved and gain a deeper insight into the factors that have the greatest impact on raising achievement. The subject leaders have worked hard to improve curricular planning, augmenting resources for practical learning.

The governors have improved their effectiveness. The chair and vice-chair of governors are using their particular expertise to good effect. Governors discuss progress with the staff and have agreed the right priorities for improvements. They have ensured that financial spending is tied in with these priorities. The governors are aware that financial projections point to a budget deficit after two years. However, they have identified savings that could be made and are supporting the headteacher in his efforts to ensure that the school receives all the funding that may be available.

The local education authority (LEA) has provided good support to the school. In recognition of the extensive weaknesses in the school two years ago and the lack of expertise amongst the staff at that time, the LEA's statement of support committed substantial support. Advice on curricular planning and feedback from observations has enabled the staff to rethink their approaches and improve the quality of provision.

Appendix – Information about the inspection

Hillside Special School was inspected under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996 by a Registered Inspector and a team of inspectors in June 2003. The inspection was critical of many aspects of the work of the school and, in accordance with that Act, the school was made subject to special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education.

The school was visited by HMI in January, May and September 2004 to assess the progress it was making to implement its action plan and address the key issues in the inspection report of June 2003.

In May 2005, two HMI returned to inspect the school for two days. The inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996, which gives Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools the authority to cause any school to be inspected. The inspection was also deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act.

Sixteen lessons or part lessons and two registration sessions were inspected. The pupils' conduct was observed around the school and on the playground at break and lunchtimes, and samples of their work were inspected. Discussions were held with the headteacher, other nominated staff, the chair of governors, an invited group of pupils, and informally with other staff. A wide range of the school's documentation was scrutinised. Account was taken of the evidence from previous monitoring inspections.

The inspection assessed the quality of education provided and the progress the school has made, in particular in relation to the main findings and key issues in the inspection report of June 2003 and the action plan prepared by the governing body to address those key issues.

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