



Ash Lea School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 122957
Local Authority NOTTINGHAMSHIRE
Inspection number 292542
Inspection date 8 November 2006
Reporting inspector Susan Aldridge

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

Type of school	Special	School address	Owthorpe Road
School category	Community		Cotgrave, Nottingham
Age range of pupils	3-19		Nottinghamshire NG12 3PA
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	0115 989 2744
Number on roll (school)	72	Fax number	0115 989 3878
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mrs S Colman
		Headteacher	Mrs L Skillington
Date of previous school inspection	15 April 2002		

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors in one day.

Description of the school

Ash Lea caters mainly for pupils with severe, profound and complex learning difficulties; about a fifth have moderate learning difficulties. Over a third have autism. There are more secondary than primary pupils, and boys outnumber girls by almost two to one. All pupils have statements of special educational needs. They come from a variety of socio-economic circumstances. About a tenth are from minority ethnic groups.

Attainment on entry is very low. A change since the last inspection is the admission of greater numbers of pupils with challenging behaviour. Ash Lea was previously a Beacon School, and its work has more recently been recognised by a number of awards. These include three School Achievement Awards, Healthy Schools Gold Award, Careers Mark, Sportsmark and an International Schools Award.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

The school evaluates its effectiveness as good, but this is a modest assessment that stems from exceptionally high expectations. Ash Lea is an outstanding school. Because the school's leadership and management are outstanding, it provides an excellent quality of education for all its pupils. Parents are delighted with the provision that the school makes for their children. The leadership of the headteacher inspires staff, and her passionate belief that there is 'no ceiling to achievement' is shared by all. Staff believe that pupils can achieve great things and they do. Although pupils' standards when they enter the school are well below those expected nationally, and remain so throughout their school careers, this is entirely the result of the nature and extent of their learning difficulties. From the Foundation Stage to post 16, pupils' achievement is outstanding and so is their personal development.

Careful recruitment and excellent arrangements for training and development result in a highly skilled staff. Teamwork is very well developed at all levels and the school's collaborative approach to improving teaching and learning is most effective, leading to teaching and learning of the highest quality. Strong partnership with parents involves them most constructively in supporting their children's learning at home. An exceptionally rich curriculum is provided and this contributes enormously to pupils' academic and personal development. Leaders aim to provide 'classrooms without walls' and they do: extensive links with the local and international communities create an exciting, challenging and enjoyable range of relevant experiences. An excellent range of accredited courses ensures that the achievements of pupils of all abilities are externally recognised. Attendance is very good. Pupils love coming to school, and take part enthusiastically in the activities provided. They are encouraged most effectively to lead healthy lifestyles and keep themselves safe. They leave school exceptionally well prepared for the next step.

Pupils receive excellent support, care and guidance; they clearly feel safe, secure and confident in school. Excellent relationships between all members of the school's community add to its harmonious atmosphere. Strong links with external agencies, meticulous planning and very good staffing levels ensure that pupils receive the support that they need. Those with challenging behaviour make outstanding improvements, and pupils' behaviour is excellent. Pupils have a voice through the student council and a system of advocacy ensures that all are included.

The school's self-evaluation is 'spot on'. It knows its strengths well. Because there is a continuous drive for improvement, huge commitment and no hint of complacency, the improvement plan identifies worthwhile areas for development. As a result, there has been excellent improvement since the last inspection and the school has an outstanding capacity to maintain its excellence and improve further.

What the school should do to improve further

The school's improvement plan identifies suitable priorities for improvement and staff are already working effectively on these.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Achievement is outstanding. Although standards are well below average because of the nature and extent of pupils' learning difficulties, the progress that pupils make is outstanding. This is linked to exceptionally high expectations, excellent teaching and support for pupils, and an outstanding range of learning experiences.

The school's assessment information shows clearly that progress has improved steadily in recent years from good to outstanding. Pupils reach the challenging individual targets set for them and by them. Whole-school targets for raising achievement are almost always met; when they are not, the school can explain this well.

The school's high expectations are well reflected in the excellent range of externally accredited courses provided for pupils of all abilities. A few pupils, for example, are successful in passing GCSE courses in art and design and expressive arts. Those with more complex needs leave with suitable accreditation such as Accreditation for Life and Living (ALL) and Towards Independence (TI). From September 2005, most pupils aged 14 to 19 have been following Entry Level courses in nine subjects and they are on course to achieve passes at Levels 1, 2 and 3 in the summer of 2007. A few pupils are set to complete Entry Level courses in one year rather than two.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Personal development and well-being are outstanding. Pupils make excellent progress in their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Every achievement is recognised and celebrated, so pupils' self-esteem is high. Self-awareness is highly developed and pupils deal with their thoughts and feelings in a most mature manner. They manage ably the good amount of responsibility they are given in school and look after themselves and one another very effectively. Residential school journeys encourage pupils' independence skills very well. The rich curriculum fosters an excellent understanding of a variety of customs and cultures. Pupils are willing contributors to the school and proudly represent their school and their county at competitive sports events. They enthusiastically raise money for many good causes. Because there are outstanding systems for encouraging good behaviour, this is exceptional; pupils act safely and stay safe in school. They find school a happy place to be in and they enjoy their learning immensely. In class, they work hard and strive earnestly to achieve. By the time they are ready to leave, pupils are exceptionally well prepared for their futures, particularly leading safe and healthy lifestyles.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Teaching is at least good and is most often outstanding. Staff have exceptionally good skills in managing pupils' behaviour, so lessons have a calm and purposeful atmosphere and pupils are very well engaged throughout. Staff are also highly competent in using their accurate assessment of pupils to plan a variety of challenging activities that meet the needs of all pupils in the class.

Teachers make most effective use of a variety of methods and resources, including information and communication technology, to stimulate and engage pupils. Teaching assistants provide exactly the right amount of support; they enable pupils to participate and do not do things for them unnecessarily.

Pupils are very effectively involved in the learning process. Teachers ensure that pupils know what the lesson objectives are, and they review learning and give good feedback during lessons. More able pupils set their own learning targets and evaluate these later.

From the Foundation Stage upwards, parents are most effectively involved in pupils' learning and receive good guidance from staff. They help young children by reinforcing or extending learning that has taken place in class, and ensure that older pupils complete coursework tasks. The homework habit is well established from an early age.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum is excellent: it is exceptionally broad and well adapted to meet the wide range of pupils' needs and capabilities. The high expectations of staff are reflected in the provision of subjects like French and the range of opportunities for pupils to gain accreditation. Partnerships with several schools means pupils have access to a wide range of sporting activities and GCSE courses that would otherwise be difficult to offer. The grouping of pupils into classes and learning groups is most effective; it promotes achievement and assures the health and safety of the most vulnerable pupils.

The curriculum is highly relevant to pupils' needs. Basic skills have a high priority and early morning sessions are used most effectively for pupils to work on these. Pupils' communication skills are promoted very well throughout the school day, using signing and symbols in particular. The strong emphasis on personal, social and health education means that learning opportunities permeate the school day and pupils develop their personal care and independence skills exceptionally well. During lunchtimes, pupils are encouraged in all of the social skills of eating together.

The curriculum widens pupils' horizons and adds enjoyment through numerous additional activities. Most notable are opportunities for pupils to take part in outdoor and adventure activities at various centres in England and to travel abroad. Pupils have a wide choice of clubs to pursue interests during lunchtimes and after school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Pupils benefit enormously from the exceptional care and support provided by the school: personal care and medical needs are met most effectively and without compromising pupils' dignity or the learning process. For instance, careful positioning ensures that pupils are comfortable and ready for learning. Therapists work with pupils in the classroom as much as possible and tube-feeding is carried out discreetly during lessons.

A good range of healthy options at lunchtimes helps pupils to make sensible choices. The close and effective attention to developing pupils' coping skills and independence places them in a strong position for the future. Pupils are supported exceptionally well through close monitoring of their progress and suitable intervention when this is necessary. Expert support is provided in each lesson by well trained teaching assistants.

The school has very effective procedures for protecting pupils and keeping them safe. Risks are carefully assessed and suitable action is taken to minimise these. Pupils with challenging behaviour receive constant reminders about their targets and record their progress on their daily logs. Pupils are involved well in the target setting process and in their annual reviews. There is good guidance about choices at 19 that is carefully tailored to individual needs.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership and management are outstanding. The headteacher's philosophy and vision are very well communicated to staff, and they share her commitment to excellence. She is most ably supported by a highly skilled deputy headteacher. The school often leads the way in national developments, demonstrating how these can be transferred effectively into a special school setting.

Leadership and management are widely shared in the school and all staff with responsibilities are exceptionally well supported by the strong emphasis on professional development. For example, two senior staff are working towards a professional qualification for headship and three others are on a course in middle management skills. Staff have agreed the criteria of good teaching and been trained in carrying out lesson observations. These developments have transformed the culture to one of welcoming observation and sharing practice; in consequence, teaching has improved.

Between them, governors have a range of skills highly relevant to governance. They are most supportive, visit regularly to keep the school's work under review and ask probing questions, particularly about expenditure. The school's resources are used most effectively, and it provides excellent value for money.

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Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	1
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1
The quality and standards in the Foundation Stage	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	1

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The behaviour of learners	1
The attendance of learners	2
How well learners enjoy their education	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

8 November 2006

Dear Pupils

Ash Lea School, Owthorpe Road, Cotgrave, Nottingham, NG12 3PA

Thank you for making us so welcome at your school. We had a very good day and enjoyed ourselves, especially talking to you at lunchtime. We came to see how you are all getting on and whether there is anything that could be done to make your school better.

We found that your school is one of the best. You are all making excellent progress in your work. Your behaviour is excellent and this helps you to learn and make progress. We were very pleased to see you making such healthy choices at lunchtime. You all get on very well together and you say that you feel safe in the school. We saw that you help each other and that is good. Your school is a very happy and busy place.

The reason that you are all doing so well is that Mrs Skillington and the staff are doing an excellent job. Everyone believes in you and they all work hard to make Ash Lea such a good school. The teaching is excellent and you are lucky to have such interesting and enjoyable experiences. The staff take excellent care of you and give you all the help that you need.

We found that the staff already know exactly what to do to improve and they are working all the time to make your school better. We feel sure that you will all keep up the excellent work.

With best wishes

Mrs Sue Aldridge

Lead inspector