

## **Inspection report**

# **Downham Preparatory School and Montessori Nursery**

**Independent school**

**DfES ref no: 926/6143**

**Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002**

**Dates of inspection: 2 - 5 May 2006**

## **INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY**

### **Purpose and scope of the inspection**

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002 in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

### **Information about the school**

Downham Preparatory School and Montessori Nursery is a non-selective independent school situated in the county of Norfolk. The Montessori Nursery School opened in 1985 and three years later the Preparatory School was founded by its present owner. Due to an increasing demand for places, a larger property was required and the school moved to its present site in 1991. A new, purpose-built preparatory school was opened in 2005. The school serves the local community and the surrounding district. It provides early morning, late afternoon and holiday care.

There are 151 pupils on roll aged from 2 to 11 years. 48 pupils are funded under the Nursery Scheme. 66 pupils attend on a part-time basis. There are no pupils with a statement of special educational need.

The school aims to give each child the '*broadest education possible*'. It believes '*it can offer a caring, emotionally-satisfying form of education, which prepares pupils fully for the next crucial stage of their academic life*'.

### **Summary of main findings**

This is a successful and well-established school that provides a good quality of education. The aims and values promoted by the school provide a strong foundation for pupils' academic and personal development. It helps pupils to achieve well and develop into confident and responsible young people. The purposeful working environment instils in the pupils a desire to learn. The broad curriculum, the good teaching and the excellent relationships enable pupils to make good progress and reach high standards. Pupils are highly articulate as a result of the strong emphasis placed on the development of speaking and listening skills.

The provision for pupils' spiritual, moral and social education is good but more could be done to develop their understanding of other cultures and lifestyles. Pupils are happy and enjoy coming to school. They learn in a setting close to woodland and conducive to enjoyment and reflection. Environmental awareness is a strength of the school. Pupils show respect for their surroundings and the animals which live there.

### **What the school does well:**

- it provides an environment which nurtures both academic and personal development within a stimulating rural setting;

- it provides a broad and balanced curriculum with effective links between subjects; this approach makes learning meaningful;
- it creates a family-like environment in which pupils feel happy to learn, As a result, pupils are confident, articulate and enthusiastic and their behaviour and attitudes to learning are excellent;
- its teachers collectively have a wide range of subject knowledge and expertise;
- it is determined to strive for high standards in all areas of school life; in this the headteacher provides very good leadership and has a clear vision for the school's future development; and
- it has developed very good working partnerships with parents.

**What the school must do in order to comply with the regulations:**

- ensure that pupils in the nursery are supervised appropriately at all times as indicated in section 3 of the report; and
- ensure that the furniture and fittings are suitable for the age and needs of younger pupils as detailed in section 5.

**Next Steps**

Whilst not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- plan opportunities across the curriculum for pupils to develop their cultural awareness;
- further develop the use of information and communication technology (ICT) across the curriculum; and
- strengthen the planning and assessment procedures for the Foundation Stage and the pupils below the age of three.

# **COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION**

## **1. The quality of education provided by the school**

### **The quality of the curriculum**

The school curriculum is broad and balanced. It makes good provision for pupils' academic, creative, physical and personal development.

In the nursery and reception classes account is taken of the national guidance for the Foundation Stage to plan an interesting range of activities appropriate for the age and stage of development of the pupils. Personal, social and emotional development, communication, language and literacy and mathematical development are planned to form the core of the curriculum. The learning programme is planned with an appropriate emphasis on activity and investigation. At its best it enables pupils to initiate activities and make their own decisions. Teachers make effective use of the very good range of high quality resources to support and extend learning. Pupils are encouraged to use their natural curiosity to discover such scientific facts as the conditions required for successful plant growth. Teachers are particularly good at nurturing pupils' emotional well-being and supporting their acquisition of social skills. The school recognises the need to develop further the outdoor area so that it reflects more closely the opportunities offered in the indoor provision. Almost all pupils meet or exceed the early learning goals at the end of their time in the Foundation Stage.

The school seeks to meet the needs of two year olds by following the principles of the national guidance 'Birth to Three Matters', but staff are not fully aware of its implications and the principles are not fully embedded in practice.

The curriculum for pupils in Key Stages 1 and 2 includes all the subjects of the National Curriculum, as well as religious education and aspects of citizenship and personal, social and health education. A strong emphasis is placed on the development of the basic skills of speaking and listening. As a result, pupils speak articulately and confidently. Reading skills are promoted effectively across the curriculum. The focus on problem solving activities in mathematics and the attention to investigative approaches provide pupils with many opportunities to apply their skills in a variety of situations. A unique feature of the curriculum is the individualised spelling programme devised for each pupil. This approach ensures that pupils progress at their own rate and develop confidence in their ability to express their thoughts and ideas fluently. The development of good handwriting skills is a notable feature of the curriculum. Pupils' cursive style is impressive by the time they leave the school.

The computer suite in the new building gives pupils the opportunity to develop basic skills in ICT. However, ICT is at an early stage of development within the curriculum and its use is not fully exploited across other subjects. History, geography and science are taught in lively ways as separate subjects. Art, music and design and technology are valued parts of the curriculum. Two modern foreign languages are offered. Spanish is taught in Years 1, 2, 3 and 4. French is introduced in Year 5.

The provision for physical education is good and includes an appropriate balance of sport and skills. The weekly swimming lessons in a local leisure centre, taught by specialist staff, enable pupils to achieve high standards in the sport.

The school provides a suitable range of extra-curricular activities that enhance the quality of educational provision. These include sports, ICT, music and art. Educational visits are carefully planned to fit in with the subject matter being studied. Pupils are prepared well before the visit and activities are structured carefully afterwards.

The school follows the Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs (SEN). A well-defined policy is in place and the school makes good provision for pupils who require additional help. Pupils work to an individual education plan (IEP) and are set realistic targets. Where appropriate, the school consults external agencies to provide additional support and guidance for pupils. Detailed records are kept on each pupil and their progress is monitored towards their targets. Parents are involved in review meetings.

### **The quality of teaching and assessment**

The quality of teaching is good and on occasions it is outstanding. Teachers are all qualified for the age range they teach and collectively have a wide range of subject knowledge and skill. In Key Stages 1 and 2, the timetable is organised so that teachers with expertise in a particular subject use their skills in more than one class. Teachers with a real interest in a subject exploit its potential. This organisation has a marked effect in helping pupils to attain high standards.

In Key Stages 1 and 2, where teaching is strongest, there is a clear sense of purpose, expectations of pupils are high and appropriate challenge is presented to them. Teachers employ a suitable range of teaching and learning strategies. Lessons proceed at a good pace, time and resources are used effectively, and pupils are managed expertly. Relationships in the classroom are excellent. There is mutual respect between teachers and pupils and the pupils adopt a mature approach to their learning as a result. New material is introduced clearly and activities to practise skills or develop understanding are well thought out. Lessons are well balanced and the time is divided well between explanation, instruction and activities for pupils. The best lessons involve stimulating introductions where the teachers own love of the subject shines through. This is evident in English, history and science lessons for example. Teachers hold the pupils' interest and show a concern to meet the range of abilities within the class.

In the Foundation Stage teaching is good. Generally teachers have a clear understanding of the needs of pupils below the age of five and the importance of providing an appropriate range of activities to develop their academic, physical, personal and social skills. The fostering of pupils' well-being is good and is given the highest priority. Pupils are given a good start to acquiring basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Relationships between the pupils and staff are excellent. Teachers use thoughtful and relevant questioning strategies to extend pupils' thinking and probe their understanding.

Lesson planning is of variable quality; at its best it enables pupils to acquire new knowledge and skills. The school has designed appropriate frameworks to guide teachers' planning. However, there is a lack of consistency from one class to another. In some classes teachers do not set out routinely what it is they want pupils to learn in a lesson. This makes it difficult for staff to measure the impact of their teaching on pupils' learning. The school is reviewing its planning for the Foundation Stage and the under-threes to ensure a consistent approach.

The particular needs of pupils with SEN are considered carefully to ensure that they receive appropriate learning activities. The teaching methods recommended in the pupils' IEPs are implemented effectively across the curriculum.

The school has a clear assessment policy. All teachers in the Foundation Stage make frequent and regular assessments of their pupils' progress in the six areas of learning. However, the assessment at present is more subjective than objective and the key milestones in pupils' academic development are not systematically recorded. The extent to which staff use the results of the assessment to inform the planning of future work is variable. Teachers regularly observe what pupils do but they do not record what they see. Observation is not yet an integral part of the assessment process. The school uses the Foundation Stage profiles for a summative assessment in the six areas of learning before pupils move into Year 1. Assessment and recording procedures are not yet in place for the two year olds.

In Key Stages 1 and 2 assessment is linked strongly to the National Curriculum and the methods used are efficient and thorough. In addition to the national tests taken at the end of Years 2 and 6, pupils are to be assessed in the optional national tests in Years 3, 4 and 5. Regular testing occurs in English and mathematics and detailed end of term reports are written. These give a clear picture of a pupil's strengths and an indication of areas for improvement.

Marking is frequent, accurate and consistent, and focuses on positive comment. However, the comments on the quality of work give too little guidance for pupils on what they need to do to improve. Oral feedback is a regular feature in lessons and exemplifies the excellent relationships which exist within classes. There are limited opportunities for pupils to self-assess and they are not always aware of the steps needed for improving their performance.

***Does the school meet the requirements for registration?***

Yes.

## **2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils**

Provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. The school helps pupils to develop into mature young people able to think for themselves. Pupils have plenty to say, with much that is worth listening to. The teachers are very successful in fostering pupils' enjoyment of school and their positive attitudes towards learning.

Learning in science makes a valuable contribution to pupils' spiritual development through exploring and talking about their own experiences, which are shared with their peers. They explore the wonders and beauty of nature by studying plants and flowers, or watching with delight the chicks hatching in the nursery. Pupils react positively to praise and awards, such as star stickers and badges, which raise their self-esteem and sense of pride in their work. The school places a strong emphasis on celebrating pupils' efforts through attractive displays of their work.

The headteacher and staff set high expectations of behaviour which all pupils meet successfully. Pupils are polite and friendly to visitors and very supportive of one another. They form a cohesive family group and older pupils act as very good role models for the younger ones.

Discussion times and well-chosen stories help pupils to understand their responsibilities to others and to the broader community. This is reinforced appropriately in studying 'people who help us', with visits from the police and fire services. Because of the small number of pupils, each can play a major role in the life of the school; for example, helping to organise fund-raising events for those in need, or acting responsibly as animal monitors.

Pupils' cultural development is promoted satisfactorily. Pupils are introduced to various customs and traditions through music, stories and art, such as designing African masks or in celebration of Easter. Learning in religious education encompasses knowledge of major world faiths. The school acknowledges the need to increase the range of multi-cultural resources and to broaden pupils' understanding further through visits or visitors from different faith communities or minority ethnic groups.

***Does the school meet the requirements for registration?***

Yes.

### **3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils**

The school cherishes its pupils, and has clear concern for their well-being. A range of policies and procedures address all aspects of pupils' development. Pupils are generally supervised well both at work and at play, and their attendance at school is properly recorded and monitored. However, on occasions, there are insufficient numbers of adults caring for the nursery pupils.

There is appropriate provision for First Aid, with staff well qualified to administer it and a designated and suitably equipped medical room. First Aid boxes are all appropriately stocked and are taken on school outings. Accidents are carefully recorded. Clear guidance is given for the administration of medication. Appropriate records of pupils with a special medical condition or need are kept and made known to relevant staff.

There is a clear discipline policy, with excellent behaviour and relationships throughout the school. Pupils report that there is no bullying. There is an appropriate child protection policy and staff have received the relevant training. The

school has made satisfactory provision for fire safety and the fire drill book is up-to-date. Risk assessment forms are completed appropriately and in detail for every eventuality, including the 'pet's corner'. Attendance and admission registers are well kept and are in good order.

The school meets the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2002, and has plans to improve access and provision for those with disabilities.

***Does the school meet the requirements for registration?***

*The school meets all but one of the requirements.*

***What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?***

*In order to comply in full with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:*

- *ensure that the correct adult/pupil ratio is in place for the supervision of the youngest pupils (paragraph 3(7)).*

#### **4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff**

The school has developed effective procedures for the recruitment of staff. All staff have been subject to a check with the Criminal Records Bureau and have been confirmed as being suitable to work with children. Appropriate checks are also made prior to staff being appointed to confirm their identity, previous employment history, medical fitness, qualifications and professional references.

***Does the school meet the requirements for registration?***

Yes.

#### **5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation**

The school's accommodation is good and provides a suitable place for the pupils to learn. It is situated in the Norfolk countryside with very good opportunities to visit a wealth of nearby places of educational interest which illustrate the history and environmental issues of the locality.

The new preparatory school building has retained some distinctive features of the original premises and combined them successfully with a modern style. The nursery is housed in large mobile classrooms. The school is well maintained, welcoming and in immaculate order.

There are a number of specialist rooms, designated for each subject area. These are light, well resourced and adequate in size for the number of pupils using them. The ICT suite is the exception. This is cramped space when used by the classes with the most pupils. The furniture and fittings are generally appropriate for the pupils. However, in the hall and the history room the furniture is too big for the



younger pupils. There is good access to the grounds, which are extensive and include a sports field, a hard court, a conservation area and a small play park.

***Does the school meet the requirements for registration?***

*The school meets all but one of the requirements.*

***What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?***

*In order to comply fully with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:*

- *ensure that the furniture and fittings are suitable for the age and needs of the younger pupils (paragraph 5(r)).*

## **6. The quality of information for parents and other partners**

The school provides very good information for parents and is always striving for ways to improve this. Great emphasis is placed on developing strong links with parents and creating a climate in which parents and teachers work together productively. An important belief of the school is that parents and teachers share a common goal in *'the successful education, happiness and well-being of the children'*.

The weekly Mothers and Toddlers Group is a demonstration of the way the school works to establish a positive relationship with parents before their child joins the community. Parents meet staff in a supportive environment, have opportunities to join in the activities with their children and are welcomed into the school community. Mothers appreciate the facilities offered and the opportunity provided for their children to become familiar with the nursery.

The staff's relationship with parents is friendly and supportive throughout the school. When parents deliver and collect their children they can exchange information informally, share concerns and discuss events. Parents who responded to the questionnaire said they feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a concern. A parent commented that the school is special because *'it looks after the individual'*.

Information is provided for parents and prospective parents in the form of an attractive and informative prospectus. This contains all the information that is required by the regulations. In addition, parents can request information from the school about its policies and practices.

There are regular newsletters from the school about a variety of topics including school visits, pupils' achievement in sport and special events. In addition, the notice boards display information of interest to parents including news of The Friends of the School's organised activities.

Written reports are sent out annually and parents are invited to discuss their children's achievement and progress. The reports provide parents with detailed and clear information about what their children can do and need to do to improve. The vast majority of parents feel they are well informed about their children's progress.

Parental response to the pre-inspection questionnaire was very good. The overwhelming majority of parents felt they were kept well informed about their children's progress and achievement.

***Does the school meet the requirements for registration?***

Yes.

## **7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints**

The school has a detailed written procedure for handling complaints that meets regulations. The policy allows for a complaint to be dealt with informally, but includes procedures so that, when necessary, complaints can be considered more fully. There has been no need for a formal panel hearing at the school.

***Does the school meet the requirements for registration?***

Yes.

## SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of school:	Downham Preparatory School and Montessori Nursery
DfES Number:	926/6143
Type of school:	Preparatory School and Montessori Nursery
Status:	Independent
Age range of pupils:	2 - 11 years
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys: 45      Girls: 44      Total: 89
Number on roll (part-time pupils):	Boys: 32      Girls: 30      Total: 62
Annual fees (day pupils):	£3,915 - £5,475
Address of school:	The Old Rectory Stow Bardolph Kings Lynn Norfolk PE34 3HT
Telephone number:	01366 388066
Fax number:	01366 388066
Email address:	Secretary@dpsmn.norfolk.sch.uk
Headteacher:	Mrs EJ Laffeaty-Sharpe
Proprietor:	Mrs E J Laffeaty-Sharpe
Reporting Inspector:	Mrs Pauline Hoey
Date of inspection:	2 - 5 May 2006

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