

White Spire School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110575
Local Authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	310350
Inspection dates	6–7 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Margaret Goodchild

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	5–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	120
6th form	28
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Marlene Harrison - Jones
Headteacher	Mr Peter Jones
Date of previous school inspection	6 October 2003
School address	Rickley Lane Bletchley Milton Keynes MK3 6EW
Telephone number	01908 373 266
Fax number	01908 643 057

Age group	5-19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This is a much larger than average special school that makes weekly residential provision for a small proportion of its pupils. Most pupils have moderate learning difficulties but the school has begun to take in some with more complex difficulties. A minority of pupils lower down the school have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The vast majority of pupils come from White British backgrounds; a small number are of Asian, Asian British or Black British heritage. Only a very few pupils speak English as an additional language. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is high, and pupils' learning difficulties mean that attainment on entry is well below average. Although the school is designated for five to 19 year olds, there are no pupils in Key Stage 1 at present, and there are twice as many boys as girls. The school has gained the bronze and silver Healthy Schools Award, Sportsmark, the Sustainable Schools Award and the Golden Wonder Community Award for its work with Help the Aged.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

This is a satisfactory school with some good features. Only a few parents communicated their views about the school but they expressed satisfaction with its work. For instance, one said, 'Our son has improved beyond our wildest dreams, we are extremely impressed with the school'.

Pupils' personal development is good. They get on well with one another, respond exceptionally well to the many opportunities to take responsibility and most grow into mature and pleasant young people. They benefit enormously from the outstanding opportunities to learn from direct experience about the world of work and from the school's extensive links with the community. The school provides good care, support and personal guidance for its pupils.

Standards are well below the national average, reflecting pupils' learning difficulties, but achievement is satisfactory overall. There are many examples of pupils making good progress but this is inconsistent because of variations in the quality of teaching, weaknesses in assessment and too little monitoring to ensure and build on existing good practice. Despite some outstanding teaching, and a fair amount that is good, teaching is satisfactory overall and not all staff are sufficiently skilled in managing pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. As at the time of the last inspection, teachers do not always match work precisely to the next steps in pupils' learning, closely track their ongoing progress or make them aware of exactly what to do to improve. Nevertheless, the curriculum is matched well to pupils' interests and to most pupils' needs, and it has been enriched outstandingly well by involvement in local, national and international initiatives. The school has rightly identified the need to develop learning programmes more closely matched to the needs of the few pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The school is led and managed satisfactorily. The headteacher has a clear vision and a strong desire to make the school as good as possible, and it runs smoothly from day to day. Overall improvement since the last inspection has been satisfactory, with good improvement in some areas. Expectations are now generally higher than they were and the curriculum has improved significantly. There has been a distinct improvement in governance, staff are all involved in school development and members of the newly restructured senior team have clearly defined responsibilities. However, lack of monitoring at all levels means that although the school is moving in the right direction, development is slower than it could be. The school is satisfactorily placed to improve further. It provides satisfactory value for money.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Students at post-16 make good progress and develop a good range of independence skills. Outstanding opportunities to learn about the world of work and to take part regularly in work experience are matched closely to each student's capabilities and aspirations. Effective links with local colleges extend the new skills and knowledge students gain at school. Teaching is good and students make good progress in their personal development. The school ensures that they are very well informed about their future options. Provision at post-16 is led and managed well and there is a strong commitment to improving it further. The school has improved the accommodation for students at post-16 so that it meets their needs satisfactorily.

Effectiveness of boarding provision

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The most recent inspection of the boarding provision judged its effectiveness to be satisfactory. The school fully met the National Minimum Standards but with a number of recommendations. It has made satisfactory improvement in addressing these issues. Boarding staff are now informed about the school's personal, social and health education programme and it has tightened up on checks when new members of staff are appointed. The school has not yet taken action to upgrade furnishings in the residential setting, as the planned move to 52-week provision will involve more extensive improvement in the way the boarding accommodation is furnished and equipped. Records of physical restraint have not yet been adjusted to meet with recommendations. Difficulties over changes in governors mean that there have not recently been formal, unannounced visits by a representative of the governing body every half term. Appropriate action is now being taken to remedy this. Overall, the boarding provision makes a good contribution to pupils' personal development and a very good contribution to their independence and growing maturity. Pupils enjoy boarding and their behaviour is managed exceptionally well in the residential setting, including that of pupils who present difficulties in class. A good programme of leisure activities is in place. However, the school is right in identifying the need to strengthen links between care and education to ensure the boarding provision makes a greater contribution to pupils' learning and achievement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve assessment procedures and ensure that assessment information is used consistently to plan lessons, track pupils' progress and make them aware of how to improve their work.
- Introduce rigorous systems of monitoring by managers at all levels to inform self-evaluation, drive school improvement and improve the quality of teaching.
- Develop provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties by ensuring their individual learning needs are met fully and increasing staff skills in managing their behaviour.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an OFSTED inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Although achievement is satisfactory overall, there are a number of instances where pupils make good progress. At Key Stage 2, some pupils are making rapid gains in their basic skills through teaching that ensures work is matched precisely to the next steps in their learning. Older pupils meet with a good level of success in accredited courses and there is a clear spurt in their progress in Year 11. Throughout the school, pupils make good progress in design and technology and produce high quality work in textiles. They make outstanding progress in learning about the world of work, for instance through work experience and Young Enterprise, and many make good progress in numeracy and science. They do less well in literacy. The school has begun to improve its work in this area, recognising that low reading ages hold back pupils'

achievement, but this is at an early stage. Overall, pupils with moderate learning difficulties achieve better than the small number with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Most students go on to further education, training or employment.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Most pupils enjoy school, are keen to learn and take a pride in their achievement. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good, and pupils make particular gains in their moral and social development. They generally work and play harmoniously together regardless of their different backgrounds, including those of minority ethnic heritage. Most pupils behave exceptionally well but behaviour is satisfactory overall because that of a small group of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties is unacceptable at times. This has given rise to a high rate of exclusions and detentions and some brief instances of disruption in lessons. The attendance rate is satisfactory. It has increased steadily, although a small number of irregular attendees pull down the overall rate. Pupils make exceptionally good progress in learning about healthy living and eagerly take part in regular physical exercise, including competitive sport. The vast majority of pupils are polite and thoughtful and have a good regard for safety. Pupils make an outstanding contribution to the school community and are fully involved in decision-making. They are very actively involved as contributors to the school's local, national and international community links. Preparation for future economic well-being is good. Although pupils are prepared only satisfactorily for the future through the progress they make in basic skills this is supplemented very well by the practical skills and understanding they gain through work experience and enterprise.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teachers have good relationships with pupils, classrooms are well organised and teachers make good use of their teaching assistants. There is some exemplary teaching, for instance in work-related learning and at Key Stage 2. Where pupils are working on accredited courses, teachers make good use of syllabus requirements and guidance. In the rest of the school, teachers identify what they intend pupils to learn and this often leads to a reasonable amount of progress but it is not based on frequent enough assessment of what they can do. The behaviour of most pupils is managed well but not all teachers are sufficiently skilled in engaging pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties or getting them to take responsibility for their own behaviour. In particular, behavioural problems occur where lessons lack pace and when a number of pupils with behavioural difficulties are placed together. The school has tried and rejected four different assessment systems and is in the process of introducing a new system. The school already checks pupils' attainment when they join the school, regularly tests their reading and numeracy, and records annually how well they are doing in National Curriculum subjects. Pupils have satisfactory targets in their individual education plans, which are generally, but not always, specific and measurable.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum meets most pupils' needs well and is enriched by outstanding links with the local community and businesses, through which the school provides a wealth of work experience opportunities for its pupils. The curriculum has also been developed significantly since the last inspection through work, for instance, for the Sustainable Schools and Healthy Schools awards, which have provided pupils with a wide range of experiences and deepened work in personal, social and health education and citizenship. The school is linking subjects increasingly by themes to help to increase pupils' enjoyment. It has introduced an initiative for promoting pupils' speaking and socialising skills, which is making a good contribution to their achievement. It has begun to target literacy, particularly through the promotion of reading and writing across the curriculum, but this is at a very early stage. There are at present no individual learning programmes provided to support those who have particular learning difficulties, for example, associated with their behavioural difficulties. A wide range of clubs, special events, visitors to the school and educational outings enrich the learning experiences the school provides.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Parents are confident that their children are secure and pupils say that they know there is someone to turn to if they need help. The school works exceptionally well in partnership with others to promote pupils' personal development and has good links with external agencies in supporting pupils' learning difficulties and disabilities. Rigorous procedures are in place for child protection and for meeting the care needs of those pupils who are looked after by the local authority. Appropriate checks are made to ensure that staff are suitable to work with children and thorough risk assessments are carried out. The school promotes and monitors attendance effectively. It provides pupils with exceptionally good information about careers and their future options. Their personal development is monitored well and pupils in the boarding provision have very good opportunities to contribute to their care plans. Good behaviour and effort are encouraged through rewards, achievement certificates and prizes. Procedures for managing behaviour work very well for the majority of pupils but are not yet fully effective in dealing with the few pupils who are most challenging. The school provides pupils with satisfactory information about how to improve their work but this is inconsistent.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school is outward looking and readily embraces new initiatives to improve the opportunities provided for pupils. Senior staff are realistic in evaluating the school's overall effectiveness. They meet regularly to discuss organisational matters and to plan future developments, for example ways of improving the curriculum. There are examples of mentoring and support being provided to improve weak teaching, and the link between performance management, staff development and the school development plan has been strengthened. There is insufficient

monitoring, however, to connect managers' overall intentions with what is going on in the school. In particular, systems for checking the quality of teaching and learning and for monitoring pupils' progress are not rigorous enough. The new chair of governors has undertaken an impressive range of training courses and thrown herself wholeheartedly into the role. She and the small number of other non-staff governors are highly involved in the school's work and have begun to challenge senior leaders. They collect information for themselves and record the findings of their visits. As a result, governance has improved significantly since the last inspection despite the fact that the governing body is not full.

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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	16-19
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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?	3	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The effectiveness of boarding provision	3	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	3	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	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

20 November 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of White Spire School, Milton Keynes, MK3 6EW

Thank you for making us welcome when we visited your school. We enjoyed our visit, and now I am writing to tell you about what we found.

White Spire is a satisfactory school that provides you with really good opportunities in some areas. Everyone gets on well together and the teachers and teaching assistants are kind to you so that you feel safe and happy. Some of you told us that you enjoy school and know that there is someone you can talk to if you have a problem. The school has some fantastic links with the community and this helps it to give you the chance to find out a lot about the world of work. During the inspection, many of you in Year 11 and at post-16 were out on work experience and some others were doing important jobs in the school. You learn a lot from this and it helps to prepare you very well for when you leave school. You also have very good opportunities to get involved with the community and to find out about staying healthy.

In some lessons, you make good progress and many of you are doing well in mathematics and science and particularly in textiles. Those of you in the older classes make good progress in the work you do on various courses and you learn new things through going to college for part of the time. The school knows that you are not all doing as well as you could with reading and writing, and the teachers are trying to help you to get better at that. The headteacher, teachers and governors are keen to make the school better for you and we have asked them to do this by making sure that:

- they check really carefully what is working best in the school and how it could be improved
- often check what you already know and always use this to plan lessons and to make sure you know how to improve your work
- provide more help to those of you who find it difficult to behave well.

You can help them in this by always working hard and some of you need to try to behave better.

Best wishes

Margaret Goodchild(Lead inspector)