

The Walnuts School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110584
Local Authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	325171
Inspection dates	13–14 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Judith Charlesworth

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

The registered childcare, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Boarding provision
Social care URN
Social care inspector

The inspection of social care was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	4–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	115
Sixth form	9
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	0
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Jane Stubbs
Headteacher	Mr Nick Jackman

Age group	4–19
Inspection dates	13–14 January 2009
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Date of previous school inspection	15 December 2005
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Admiral Drive Hazeley Milton Keynes MK8 0PU
Telephone number	01908 563885
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

The Walnuts is a residential special school for learners aged 4 to 19 who have autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) or severe social communication difficulties. All have associated learning difficulties ranging from mild to severe, and a proportion of learners have additional problems. Learners are admitted to The Walnuts at any time in their school career, often from mainstream school. However, the severity of learners' difficulties on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is increasing. The school moved into new purpose-built premises eighteen months ago and has provided education for 14- to 19-year-olds since then. There are currently 115 learners on roll, with seven four- to five-year-olds in the EYFS and nine learners in the sixth form. All have statements of special educational needs. Boys outnumber girls by five to one, which is typical for this type of school. The school has partnerships with a range of professional agencies, and employs its own speech and language and occupational therapists. It has gained a number of awards and accreditations, most recently the National Autistic Society Autism Accreditation and re-accreditation with Investors in People. The school is currently bidding for specialist school status with a specialism in communication and interaction.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Walnuts provides good quality education, and learners of all ages achieve well. The achievement of children in the EYFS is outstanding. These were also the findings of the last inspection, and the issues identified for improvement at that time have been effectively addressed. However, the last few years have not been easy for the school. It has faced a number of difficulties which adversely affected its running and development for a time, although many of these are being resolved. Difficulties included a rapid 33% rise in both pupil and staff numbers, illness in the leadership team, and difficulties with recruitment of suitable subject specialists to meet the needs of the new secondary department. This particularly affected the roles of the headteacher and senior managers who, understandably, focused on the day-to-day management of the school and maintaining stability for the students. However, as a result, some aspects of the school's work, such as the further development of the secondary curriculum and the leadership and management roles of staff, fell behind. This is fully acknowledged by the school and represented in honest self-evaluation and good plans for addressing the difficulties and improving the school. A proportion of the issues have begun to be resolved, as pupil numbers and staffing issues settle and the headteacher is better able to focus closely on driving forward school improvement.

Despite the difficulties, the maintenance of effective teaching, and outstanding provision for personal development and well-being, have enabled learners to continue to achieve well. There have also been some good developments since the last inspection, for example in the newly established sixth form. Provision in the EYFS has been successfully reviewed and adapted to ensure that all the latest welfare, learning and development requirements are met, and provision in the EYFS is outstanding. Throughout the school, learners' academic standards vary widely, but are, understandably, low overall. Their personal development is outstanding. The school helps learners to take part in and contribute to the community, and prepares them very well for their adult lives. They clearly enjoy school and their behaviour is outstanding, which is a great achievement for them.

The established approach taken to meeting individuals' needs and promoting their personal development and well-being is very effective and strongly supports learners' academic achievement. The quality of teaching and support, care and guidance are good, but the curriculum is satisfactory. The curriculum for pupils in the primary age range is good, and that for children in the EYFS is outstanding. Although the secondary curriculum is adequate, schemes of work lack detail and do not take sufficient account of the latest government guidance. The sixth-form curriculum is satisfactory and has been operational for just one term. While it is not yet fully established, it is off to a positive start.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. Although the governing body supports the school's direction and fulfils its statutory duties, members do not always provide sufficient independent support and challenge. Aspects of leadership and management, such as improving and defining the roles of curriculum subject leaders and other managers, and developing a robust assessment system for non-core subjects, have been affected by the school's recent difficulties. The school's self-evaluation has recognised this, and the issues are being positively addressed. School improvement and development have recently got back on course. The headteacher has a clear, well-articulated vision for the school. With the support of staff and governors, he has fought and won the battle for a new school. The Walnuts has gained several awards in recent years, and has applied for specialist school status to further cement its place

at the heart of the community. A new head of the residential provision has just been appointed and has taken over the leadership role from the headteacher, thus releasing him to drive development and improvement work. There are high aspirations and good strategic plans for The Walnuts and for its development as a centre of excellence and expertise. The school's capacity for improvement is good.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The sixth form has only been operating for one term. Teaching is of a high quality, carefully planned and well resourced. The sixth form benefits from the school's overarching management systems and policies. Development work is driven by the class teacher, who manages the new department effectively. Students are very well cared for, and good provision is made for their health, safety and welfare. There is a good focus on helping students to make safe and healthy choices and become independent. The students enjoy their work and learn well. Their progress is assessed and tracked using the school's common systems, which show that they continue to make good academic progress in the core subjects. Some of their work will lead to accreditation, but there is scope to develop accreditation further. The pilot curriculum is satisfactory. It is relevant and meets students' needs. However, planning is relatively short-term, and some areas, such as provision in information and communication technology, college links and post-school pathways, are just beginning. The plan for continuing curriculum development is appropriate, and staff are beginning to address the balance between the students' need for structure and providing a more relaxed, adult environment. So far, the sixth form effectively continues the school's work in preparing students for their future adult lives.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 1

The EYFS makes outstanding provision, and the quality noted in the last inspection has been maintained. The provision is very well led and managed. Where appropriate, the school's policies, systems and practices incorporate the EYFS national framework. Care is taken to ensure that all aspects of learning, development and welfare that are specific to the EYFS are effectively implemented, for example in relation to the assessment arrangements. Very close relationships with parents ensure that they are effective partners in their children's education. This forms an excellent start to the school's positive partnership with parents. Parents are very pleased with the effect the school has on their children and with the support they themselves receive. The children's welfare and well-being are given high priority. The children respond quickly to the structured environment and individual plans made to support their unique qualities. Consequently, their personal development is outstanding. As the children begin to communicate and understand the world around them, they feel safe and gain confidence. Their behaviour improves and they begin to learn effectively. The children clearly enjoy school and start to make positive relationships with one another and the staff. Careful, detailed observations and records of each child show that they make outstanding progress in relation to their starting points and capabilities. The EYFS curriculum is outstanding. It is very well planned, and designed to be interesting and relevant to the children's needs and interests. There is a good balance of activities for the children to choose from, as well as stimulating tasks and activities that are led by adults. Supporting the children's communication skills and reducing their frustrations and anxieties is central to the EYFS work. This is very effective, and the children are well prepared for moving into the main school.

Effectiveness of boarding provision

Grade: 3

The boarding provision was judged to be satisfactory, and most National Minimum Standards were met. A full report on this provision is available on application to Ofsted.

What the school should do to improve further

- Implement a system to consistently assess and track learners' progress in subjects other than English, mathematics and science, and personal, social and health education.
- Develop the secondary curriculum in line with current recommendations and national guidance.
- Develop the leadership and management roles and capabilities of the governing body and school staff.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Learners' attainment on entry varies from very low to broadly average, but they all achieve well in relation to their starting points and capabilities. This is due to the outstanding provision the school makes for supporting the learners' personal development, communication skills and behaviour. By successfully addressing these, the school enables them to become ready to learn more effectively. Progress is clearly shown by the regular achievement of targets set on learners' individual education plans. It is also shown in the records which track learners' attainment over time in core subjects. This is a good improvement since the last inspection. The school has begun to analyse the data and identify how learners' achievement can be further improved. Recent external moderation of the assessment information confirms good achievement. For example, in a very large national cohort of similarly aged pupils with ASD, more Walnuts learners than average achieved in the top 2.5% for English, mathematics and science. Nevertheless, the senior staff implemented a whole-school initiative to improve reading, as data analysis showed this to be relatively weaker. Some learners' progress is such that they are able to return to mainstream school, or attend part time for certain courses such as GCSEs. However, there is a limited range of other opportunities for accreditation. The good achievement of lower-attaining learners is clearly evident in their individual records and reports. Overall, learners' achievement prepares them well for further education and adult life.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Many enter the school unable to make sense of the world. However, they soon become sociable, well-motivated individuals who enjoy school and are proud of their achievements. They learn to take part in, and give back to, the school, as well as the local and wider communities, for example through assemblies, charity work and the use of community facilities. The residential provision and older learners' use of the new 'independence flat' make a strong contribution to this aspect of their development. Learners are supported to understand and abide by the school and class rules, and society's moral code. The challenging behaviours which interfere with learning diminish quickly, and behaviour is outstanding. Learners show developing confidence, for example volunteering to come to the front of the class to read out their work on Greek mythology. They enjoy school, and their attendance is excellent. Learners show consideration for one another, and incidents of bullying and racism are rare. They enjoy cultural celebrations and expression

through art and music. Most learners understand how to choose healthy options. They enjoy exercise, and the new grounds and fitness trail are popular options. Most learners understand how to eat healthily, although not all are able to achieve this. Learners feel safe and happy in school, which is often a contrast to their previous school experiences. This is shown by their positive relationships and outstanding attitudes to work. The high standards in learners' personal development have been maintained since the last inspection.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The school's leaders and managers have a clear and accurate view of the quality of teaching. It has maintained its quality since the last inspection. Teaching is well supported by constructive monitoring and feedback, and wide-ranging professional development that extends to all staff. Some teaching is excellent, and there are outstanding elements to many lessons. These include a consistent approach to supporting learners' behaviour and communication skills, and a very calm approach which helps learners to stay focused on their work. Staff know each individual very well, and work is closely matched to their needs and abilities. In the core subjects of English, mathematics and science, work is effectively underpinned by careful assessment. Lessons are very well planned in considerable detail, and these plans are followed closely. Adults work very well together and teaching assistants are skilled in supporting learning and behaviour. Some lessons include less effective elements, for example, the positioning of activities during group work so that all learners can see or a lack of clarity about what they should learn. However, these are not widespread, and most have already been identified by managers. As a result of the good teaching, learners benefit from a range of fast-paced, challenging activities which hold their interest, and help them learn and achieve well. Parents are very happy with their children's progress.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The quality of the curriculum varies across different departments of the school. The long-established primary curriculum is good, as it was found to be in the last inspection. It follows on well from the outstanding EYFS curriculum, which appropriately extends into the first year of the primary school. The core subjects are taught independently, and most other subjects are taught through topics. This approach suits learners' ages, needs and interests. However, curriculum development to meet the needs of the new secondary school population has not been fast enough, and the curriculum does not yet fully adhere to the 2007 National Curriculum guidance. This is partly due to the difficulties the school has experienced in the past two years, and partly because there has been no effective 'master plan' for development, as there is for the sixth-form curriculum. The curriculum for the 11- to 14-year-olds is broadly similar to the primary curriculum, with the inclusion of some additional aspects. The curriculum for 14- to 16-year-olds includes further aspects, such as work-related learning, but does not fully meet the expectations for the age group. Good use is made of the nearby secondary school for learners who want to study GCSEs, but other opportunities for making curriculum choices and accredited learning are limited.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school cares very well for its learners. It makes very good provision for their well-being and for reducing the behavioural and communication difficulties that affect learning. The school works very effectively to keep the learners safe and healthy. The advice of speech and language therapists and other professionals is valued and followed. Helpful and innovative individual education plans are written for the learners rather than adults, and progress towards the various targets is closely monitored. The school has a good system for assessing and tracking learners' attainment in English, mathematics and science. This helps staff provide them with good academic guidance, but the system does not extend to other subjects. Consequently, assessment in these subjects is inconsistent and does not provide a robust overview to support planning for improvement. Good practices are in place to safeguard the health and welfare of the learners, although a few of the related policies are out of date. Partnerships with parents and carers are strong, and the great majority are very pleased with the school and all aspects of its work. Partnerships with other schools, professionals and community organisations are also strong and do much to support this aspect of the school's work and learners' progress.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The school has experienced a number of difficulties over the past two years that have had an adverse impact on leadership and management. In particular, there was a temporary reduction in the number of senior managers, which affected the role of those remaining. For example, for some time the headteacher had to concentrate on orchestrating the build and move to the new school, and then on managing the residential provision. At the same time, the assistant headteachers had to spend their time teaching and managing day-to-day matters in order to preserve the quality of education for the learners. Difficulties were compounded by a 33% rise in pupil numbers within eighteen months, and a similar increase in new staff to accommodate them. Consequently, there was a delay in establishing leadership and management within the staff body so that responsibilities could be more effectively shared. The governing body is supportive, and fulfils its statutory duties adequately. However, it is not sufficiently proactive in monitoring the work of the school and offering constructive challenge. The leaders and managers have worked hard to preserve the quality of education for the learners. The main effect of the difficulties has been on curriculum development, the maintenance of some management systems and practices, and the development of the roles and capabilities of governors and middle and senior managers to meet the needs of the new school. However, this has been recognised in honest self-evaluation, and good strategic plans have been made to improve the school. Work has successfully begun to address the issues, and some have already been resolved. The vision for the school is well communicated and shared by staff, most of whom are keen to take on and lead development and change. Recent examples include leading on the application for various awards, developing the sixth form and EYFS provisions, and analysing performance data more closely to inform school improvement. The school is moving forward again and its capacity for further improvement is good.

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Annex A

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

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	1	
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	1	
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	1	
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	1	
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1	
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	2	

Achievement and standards

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

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
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	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
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	3	
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	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

27 January 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of The Walnuts School, Milton Keynes, MK8 0PU

Thank you very much for welcoming me into school last week. I came to The Walnuts to see how it was working and how you were all doing, and I was very pleased with what I found. I agree with the staff and your parents: The Walnuts is a good school, and some aspects of its work are outstanding.

Your new school building is super, and I am sure that its lovely facilities help the staff to provide a good quality of education. It has brought a few unexpected problems too, though. For example, there has been an enormous increase in the number of pupils and staff, who have both needed time to settle. There have also been some staffing pressures, which have meant that the school has not developed as much as the leaders and managers would like. These difficulties have mostly been resolved.

I found that the headteacher and staff work very hard to help you to stay safe and healthy, enjoy your work, and prepare you for the next stage of your lives. With the school's expert help, your personal development is excellent. The staff give you an interesting range of things to do, although the curriculum for those of you at secondary age should be more dynamic. Teaching is good and so you make good progress. Well done!

I have asked the leaders and managers to improve three aspects of the school's work. These are:

- to track your progress in all subjects, so that staff can help you achieve even more
- to develop the curriculum for those of you of secondary age
- to develop the role and skills of the governing body and school managers so that they can take more responsibility.

Yours faithfully

Judith Charlesworth

Lead Inspector