

Barbara Priestman School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108879
Local Authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	324855
Inspection dates	15–16 December 2008
Reporting inspector	Alastair Younger

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	88
Sixth form	23
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Val Milnes
Headteacher	Mrs Carolyn Barker
Date of previous school inspection	1 November 2005
School address	Meadowside Sunderland Tyne and Wear SR2 7QN
Telephone number	0191 5536000
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Age group	11–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

This is a small special school situated in one of the less prosperous areas of the country. Pupils come from a very wide range of backgrounds and are mostly White British. All pupils have a statement of special educational need, mainly reflecting either physical difficulties with additional complex needs or, increasingly, autistic spectrum disorders with severe communication needs. Boys significantly outnumber girls.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school. It is improving rapidly after a period of uncertainty caused by many changes in leadership, which coincided with radical changes in its designated role. The recently appointed headteacher provides excellent leadership and the leadership of the school has stabilised. Nearly all parents voice great support and gratitude for the way the school is helping their children to secure successful futures. A small minority of parents of pupils with physical difficulties and/or disabilities feel that the needs of their children are less well met than was previously the case. The judgement of the inspection is that these pupils benefit from opportunities to mix with others and this enables them to thrive in their personal development and to make good academic progress. There exists, however, a slight inequality in the achievements of the most able pupils when compared with that of others.

Pupils enjoy coming to school. Absence is nearly always the result of physical or emotional fragility. Learning is rarely disrupted by misbehaviour because it is well managed by well trained staff, and pupils respect the fact that some of their peers face greater difficulties in controlling their emotions than they do themselves. Pupils respect the fact that they can contribute to improving the community of the school by making sensible suggestions, safe in the knowledge that their views are being listened to. Pupils in school respond well to encouragement regarding how to adopt healthy lifestyles. This however is not always the case out of school, as a recent survey confirmed.

Teaching is good, resulting in most pupils achieving well. Information provided by the school points to the fact that this was not the case a year ago but successive rounds of monitoring by senior staff and the local authority have shown significant improvements and the evidence of inspection supports this. Most teaching is good and an increasing number of lessons exhibit excellent features. In most lessons pupils can be clearly seen to be working hard, enjoying their learning and achieving well, but in a few there is a lack of challenge for more able pupils, resulting in them switching off and becoming passive rather than active learners. The curriculum has been strengthened this year by shifting the focus of expectation for these higher attaining pupils to GCSE accreditation rather than Entry Level qualifications. Overall, the curriculum is good. It has a good focus on promoting essential basic skills, provides many enjoyable learning experiences, including an increasing range of educational visits, and prepares older pupils well for leaving school.

Pupils are very well cared for. Parents are hugely appreciative of the way in which their children are looked after and protected in school. Educational support and guidance have been greatly improved through the development of increasingly rigorous and accurate checking of each pupil's progress. It is these checks that are enabling leaders and managers to evaluate the school's effectiveness with increasing accuracy and plan changes to bring about future improvement, for instance by expecting teachers to use the increasing amount of reliable information available to them to devise lessons that are equally interesting and challenging to all pupils.

Significant changes have strengthened leadership and management. There is a very strong focus on school development, based on improving teaching, the curriculum and the checking of pupils' progress. In each of these there has been considerable improvement over the past year. Self-evaluation is rigorous and enables the school to focus effectively on priority areas for development. Governors are hugely supportive but, although they are very well led, some

are not yet sufficiently involved in finding out for themselves what actually goes on in school or making clear the direction they wish their school to take.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Sixth form students make good progress because they are well taught, encouraged to become more independent in their learning and personal development and given good guidance as to how they can contribute to the community. For instance, they are developing their enterprise skills and the ways they can help people from around the world who are less fortunate than themselves. A significant pointer to the success of the sixth form is that every student who opts into it stays with it, taking good advantage of the opportunities it offers to prepare them for future well-being, mainly in the realms of adult education or training. Pupils are given extensive opportunities to gain experience of working for a living, often in very supportive situations appropriate to their circumstances. There is no discrete management of sixth form provision. It shares the same good characteristics of leadership and management as that of the rest of the school.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise the level of challenge for the most able pupils and give them more opportunities to work with greater independence.
- Ensure that weaker teaching is improved rapidly.
- Continue to work closely with the parents of pupils with physical disabilities to reassure them that their children are receiving the support they are entitled to.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Achievement is good. Pupils achieve well because they are well taught, enjoy learning and are provided with good opportunities to do so. There is no significant difference in the achievement of pupils from different backgrounds or with differing learning difficulties and/or disabilities, or between boys and girls.

Typically, pupils enter the school at a level of attainment closer to that of pupils four years younger than their actual age. The gap closes as they pass through the school but in the past more able pupils have not been given sufficient opportunity to demonstrate the progress they have made because the level of accreditation they have been given access to has not been sufficiently demanding. This is being addressed this year by entering many more pupils for GCSE accreditation rather than the former lower Entry Level qualifications in English, mathematics and science.

As a result of rapidly improving teaching, pupils are making good progress in most lessons. Most teachers are increasingly making use of assessment data to match their teaching to the learning needs of pupils. The curriculum is being adapted well to ensure that pupils achieve over a greater range of subjects.

There is increasingly convincing evidence of pupils meeting their personal targets and that these targets are equally challenging and realistic.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good, as is their well-being. Pupils behave well and attend whenever they can. Many pupils have extended or frequent absences as a result of their medical or emotional needs. These are carefully monitored to ensure that absence is legitimate. Attendance has risen over the past three years but does not quite match the school's self-imposed target, partly because a few families take holidays in term time. Pupils behave well. Any misbehaviour does not interfere with the learning of pupils because it is well managed and because pupils demonstrate great tolerance and understanding of others who may be struggling through a period of personal crisis. Every parent and pupil consulted during the inspection expressed the view that life in school was happy and enjoyable, helped by the fact that their views are listened to and the mutual feeling that they contribute to the community of the school. Pupils are immensely considerate of one another; they recognise that their actions can contribute to keeping the school a safe place, for instance by behaving sensibly and thoughtfully. The facilities for physical exercise on-site are lacking but this is compensated for by the good links with other schools and facilities in the community. The way in which pupils are helped to improve their basic skills and learn how they can contribute to the betterment of society stand pupils in good stead for future success.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching is good. It has improved considerably over the past year as a result of excellent initiatives imposed by the headteacher, to which nearly all teachers have responded positively. Teachers are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that pupils' learning is the hallmark of their effectiveness. Good teaching predominates but there is still a small amount of weaker practice. Standing in the way of increasing effectiveness is the fact that teachers could expect more of pupils, especially the most able. Many pupils are capable of learning more independently and with less support but are given few opportunities to do so. As a result they absorb the teaching passively rather than using it as a springboard for independent research or learning. Too often, things are done for pupils that they could beneficially do for themselves. Good improvements in teaching include making good use of increasingly effective assessment data to ensure that the learning needs of individuals are clearly stated and well met. Good lessons have a palpable 'buzz' about them, with enthusiastic pupils keen to show off what they have remembered from previous lessons and being praised for doing so. Where new learning opportunities are clearly targeted to challenge the most able and support the least, this makes a clear difference to learning. However, this does not happen often enough. More mundane teaching is characterised by pupils doing things but not learning much. In lessons such as these, pupils can clearly be seen to become bored through lack of challenge.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good. It focuses well on promoting basic skills but does not neglect those areas in which individuals can demonstrate their special skills, talents and interests. The timetable includes many opportunities for pupils to understand the importance of developing their personal awareness alongside their learning. Many meaningful experiences extend learning

beyond the classroom. A visit to a grand house, for instance, resulted in pupils' excellent work in numeracy and literacy and their growing awareness of history, geography and social issues. Most pupils are well prepared for moving on to the next stages in their lives but occasionally the most able leave without having been given the opportunity to gather experience in the workplace because the focus of work experience falls on the sixth form rather than Key Stage 4.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Parents express confidence in the way the school cares for their children and safeguards their futures. This is also the view of the inspection. A few parents have expressed worries about the care and support of their children who have physical difficulties and/or disabilities. They should be reassured that their children receive the support they are entitled to because the school compensates for its lack of facilities by making good use of other facilities in the locality.

Educational guidance and support are good, helped by the increasing accuracy of assessment and teachers' use of it to guide learning which is better matched to individual capability. The school has a clear picture of how well pupils are progressing, where improvements need to be made and where success can be celebrated.

A strong feature of the school is its involvement in very successful initiatives to work with other partners to open up opportunities for pupils to find meaningful employment upon leaving school. Excellent partnerships have been built up initially, and very successfully, with the National Health Service, but now extending to other public sector settings. Safeguarding is a high priority and the school meets the current government requirements.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Under the outstanding leadership of the headteacher, a good team of senior managers has been assembled. Their roles and responsibilities are clearly identified and effectiveness is closely monitored. Self-evaluation is very accurate and honest. It clearly identifies areas of strength and where changes have to be made. This ensures that improvements take place speedily and effectively. An extensive programme of training has been put in place to ensure that staff can address the changing demands of the pupil population. Significant steps have been taken to alleviate the worries of parents of pupils with physical difficulties and/or disabilities.

The school is cementing its position as a valuable part of the community, not only locally but nationally and internationally. Initiatives undertaken with the National Health Service are groundbreaking. They are opening up opportunities for pupils' future employment within the public services. The school's promotion of community cohesion is good.

Care is taken to ensure that all pupils share equal opportunities. In previous years the qualifications they have gained have often not represented their true level of attainment and expectations of better attainment have not been high enough. Important steps have been taken to improve teaching and learning and there is clear evidence to show that this is making a difference to achievement.

Governance is satisfactory. It is developing well but governors tend to accept what is reported rather than taking on a more challenging and rigorous role in the monitoring and leadership of school.

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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	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 capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	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?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	2
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	2	2
The behaviour of learners	2	2
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?	2	2
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?	2	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
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

17 December 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Barbara Priestman School, Sunderland, SR2 7QN

It was a real pleasure to visit your school the other day. Thank you for looking after me so well, showing me round, and talking to me.

I can say very confidently that Barbara Priestman is a good school. You are well taught and make good progress. It is very clear that you enjoy attending whenever you can and that when you do you behave well and work hard. You have lots of opportunities to learn in settings outside of the classroom, to meet people from different backgrounds to your own and prepare you well for the day you leave school and start looking for work or college placements. You are well looked after by staff and you play an important role in looking after each other through your sensible behaviour and your awareness of other people.

I collected lots of information during my time in school and talked to many of you and your staff. This helped me to make some suggestions about how the school can improve even further. Some of you could do harder work which would help you get better qualifications. Some of you could be given the chance to work more independently so that you are taking more responsibility for your learning. Also some lessons are not interesting enough to help you learn, and so these need to improve.

A few of your parents worry about changes in the school over the past few years. It is important that staff work hard to reassure them that you are getting the support you are entitled to.

All the best and good luck for the future.

Alastair Younger

Lead inspector