

The Valley School

Valley Way, Stevenage, SG2 9AB

Inspection dates 16-17 October 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school. Select

- All groups of students achieve well at school. Their achievement in language and communication, reading, English, mathematics and in their personal and social development is good.
- Teaching is good, resulting in most students making at least expected progress. Where teaching is at its best, students are challenged and therefore extend their skills.
- Most of the parents who responded to the online questionnaire (Parent View) rightly say the school keeps their children safe.
- Behaviour is good and students say that there is no bullying. Attendance is above that seen for similar schools and has continued to improve.
- Students receive good-quality care and support and benefit from effective links with specialists to make sure all their needs are met.
- A good range of experiences for all students promotes their strong spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and their enjoyment of learning.
- The headteacher is well supported by the senior leadership team. He has created a clear vision for the future and effectively brought about improvements since the last inspection. All leaders and managers, including the governors, have an accurate view of the school's performance resulting in increasingly good outcomes across the school.
- Efficient planning by the governing body means money is spent well for the benefit of all groups of students, including those who are known to be eligible for the extra government funding (pupil premium).
- Good-quality training shows that there is a strong focus on managing and improving the performance of all staff.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- There is not yet enough outstanding teaching to maximise all students' achievement.
- In a small minority of lessons teachers do not always challenge the more able students and so opportunities are lost to raise their rates of progress.
- Systems to collect information about students' progress are not easily manageable and/or accessible to all staff.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection team observed 11 lessons taught by 13 teachers, all of which were joint observations with either the headteacher or deputy headteacher.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher and deputy headteacher, a group of students, three members of the governing body, including the vice chair and a telephone conversation took place with an adviser from the local authority. Informal conversations with students took place throughout the inspection. One letter was received from a parent.
- Inspectors listened to a selection of students read and observed others reading from a wide range of sources.
- The inspection team scrutinised school documentation, including information relating to assessment and students' progress, planning for school improvement and records about behaviour, attendance and safeguarding.
- There were 11 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) and inspectors considered a survey of parents' views recently undertaken by the school.

Inspection team

Ronald Hall, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Lynne Thorogood

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school has recently been re-designated as a school for students with learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders and speech, language and communication difficulties.
- All students have a statement of special educational needs and most of the students are of White British origin.
- The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is above average, with the proportion for whom English is an additional language being average.
- The proportion of students entering the school with additional special educational needs is increasing.
- The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals and the pupil premium, additional government funding, is above average. The school does not receive any money from the government's Year 7 catch-up funding.
- A number of Year 11 students attend North Hertfordshire College on a range of courses.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of outstanding teaching and further improve students' achievement through:
 - all teachers consistently challenging the more able students in lessons and so accelerate their rates of progress
 - making sure that all teachers have easy access to information on their students' progress and use this effectively to plan future learning.
- Improve leadership and management by making sure that the information available about students' progress is readily available to staff and easy to use.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Students at the Valley School make good and at times outstanding progress with their speech, language and communication skills. Those students with autistic spectrum disorders also make good progress, through the use of a good range of technological aids that not only allow them to engage in lessons fully but also to explore the world around them. Students who have social and behavioural difficulties make progress in line with their peers, due to the caring, thoughtful and considered approach all staff use to help them overcome their difficulties. For example, in a good physical education lesson, a student with deep seated emotional and social needs who finds it very difficult to cope in a closed environment, was very well supported by staff and so joined in the lesson with increasingly clear enjoyment.
- Year 11 students make good progress in their personal and social, as well as vocational skills, through their attendance at the North Hertfordshire College. The students study several courses from hairdressing and beauty to construction and car maintenance and are on track to attain qualifications in these areas.
- The school utilises its new sensory room effectively to provide a wide range of visual and sensory stimuli for students who find it difficult to communicate and engage with their surroundings.
- Students with developing speech are encouraged to use words and where necessary signs to show that they understand questions and make comments about the subjects they are learning. Students are given time and the freedom to find ways to express their views. This was clearly demonstrated in a Year 11 science lesson on evaporation. A student was asked which material he thought held the most water, a towel or handkerchief. Both were soaked with water and in order to express his view the student placed both over his face and then gave the correct answer and the reason for this. In a Key Stage 3 English lesson, students were given plenty of time to respond to the teacher's questioning and were encouraged to explain what they were writing about, the story they were studying and the characters in it.
- Students enjoy books, whether it is to recognise pictures, simple text or to read at length. They demonstrate knowledge of letters and the sounds they make (phonics) and this allows them to spell and write simple sentences. As they progress through the school their reading skills improve to the extent that some reach skills in line with their ages and peers in mainstream schools.
- All students make good progress in both mathematics and English and the slower progress rates seen in English in past years have now been rectified.
- Students new to the school settle quickly and respond well to the care and nurture they receive, so that they make good gains in their learning and excellent improvements in their social skills and behaviour. There are examples of outstanding progress for some individual students who are making particularly rapid gains in communication and reading skills.
- All groups of students regardless of background, including those known to be eligible for the pupil premium, make good progress. There is no difference in progress between different groups, as each individual works towards targets that bring about good progress. There is also no difference in the attainment in English and mathematics of those eligible for the pupil premium and those who are not.
- Opportunities are missed in some lessons as the more able students are not consistently challenged and so their rates of progress are not as good as they might otherwise be.

- All groups of students, whatever their disability or special educational needs, make good progress with their physical development. Students are enthusiastic and keen to extend their skills in individualised activities, a wide range of therapies and physical education including horse riding, football, cheer leading and a wide range of other physical activities.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teachers know their students well and relationships are extremely positive. Lessons are well planned and the needs of each individual are generally met so that the majority of students understand what is expected. However, in a small number of lessons teachers do not consistently challenge the more able students and so opportunities are missed to accelerate their learning.
- Reading is generally taught well to all students and shows that staff have been trained in the teaching of phonics. As a result, students who read to the inspectors were able to recognise and name letter sounds accurately as they looked through their books. However, the senior leadership team is aware that further training is needed.
- Mathematics has been the strongest subject across the whole school and students spoken to frequently mentioned that this was their favourite subject. They stated it was fun and varied and they enjoyed extending their knowledge of numbers and working things out for themselves. For example, in one lesson related to equivalent fractions students quickly began to recognise and work out which fractions equalled which, due to the practical and fun nature in which the subject was taught.
- Teachers make use of many different approaches to produce the best possible outcomes for students. Interactive whiteboards and computers are constantly used to provide a stimulus to lessons as well as enhance learning further.
- Questioning and discussion are used well to encourage communication and provide opportunities for students to respond and/or talk to each other.
- Teachers generally plan well and use students prior learning effectively to support new learning. However, as whole-school information on students' progress is not easily accessible, this is not always used to plan for future learning and so hinders rates of progress across the school.
- Frequent assessment of students' skills allows older students in particular to be involved in planning their next steps. Staff provide good-quality, verbal feedback which helps students to know what they need to do next and how to build on their skills. This was well explained by one student who said, 'I like the way they treat you here. They give you help and support, they reward you. Teachers help you much more here than in mainstream.'
- The other adults who support learning make a positive contribution to students' progress because they encourage communication, support reading, promote interaction and encourage students to do tasks and/or record outcomes of their learning.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Many students enter with very challenging behaviour caused by their wider learning difficulties. The school's effective behaviour policy and procedures are well implemented by all staff, which in turn allows students to be able to change their behaviour and become successful learners over time.

- Where teaching is best, little or no time is lost as a result of poor behaviour and the focus of the school is on learning. However, where teaching is not as good some low level disruption and lack of concentration occur, which slows progress.
- Staff are regularly trained in the management of behaviour and in restraint procedures for when those rare incidents occur. These situations are always carefully logged and analysed to track any emerging patterns of behaviour. However, the focus of all staff is on the de-escalation of potential incidents. This is very effective and so helps to create a positive learning and social environment.
- The school provides good support to parents and families so that a common approach to learning and behaviour can be developed between the school and home. This is also closely linked to the external, professional agencies the school uses and so together makes sure that all the students' needs are met both at home and in school.
- Although most parents in both the online questionnaire and that carried out by the school were positive about behaviour in school, a small number in both expressed concerns regarding this area. These concerns were not observed during the inspection process; the good behaviour seen played a crucial part in creating the enjoyment of school and learning, which the students themselves expressed. School records show that this behaviour is the norm.
- Students were very positive about safety at the school, particularly considering the vulnerable and sometimes volatile nature of some students. They feel that staff stress the importance of keeping safe and understanding how important this is in life generally. Trips and residential visits are an important element of school life for all students and add so much to students' experiences; care is taken to make sure safety is paramount.
- The Valley School is a happy place where everyone works and socialises well together, so bullying is not an issue. Students have an excellent understanding of what bullying is and why it is not good. This includes an understanding of cyber bullying and the risks of misusing social networking sites on the internet.
- Attendance compares favourably to that of special schools nationally and is continuing to improve. Exclusions and behavioural incidents have fallen sharply; this is a reflection of the enjoyment of school shown by students.
- Part of the school's provision for older students is to provide college placements and animal care opportunities. Detailed risk assessments are in place and great care is taken to make sure that this is a positive and successful part of learning. One student expressed her view of this very ably when she stated, 'I like the animals. We learn about animal care. It helps us to look after each other too.'

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher, with the support of the senior leadership team and the governing body, has made many improvements since the last inspection and has high aspirations for the future of the school. Leaders have successfully used the national Teachers' Standards to develop and maintain good teaching, and have provided good quality training for all staff, including, for example, one member of staff being supported to become a qualified teacher.
- Performance is well monitored by both the senior staff and governors, resulting in a clear view of how well the school is doing. It has also made sure that all students make at least the progress expected of them, and many make better-than-expected progress. However, systems to track this progress are not easily accessible and so opportunities are lost for all staff to make effective use of students' information.

- There is a positive partnership between the school and the local authority, which effectively provides the school with the specific help they need in identifying what is working well and what needs improving and especially so in the provision of staff training.
- Middle leaders are relatively new to their posts but are active and effective members of the school leadership team. All are fully responsible for their areas and as such are held accountable for the results they achieve.
- The range of qualifications available to students has increased, alongside the range of subjects on offer in each year group. This includes a wide range of alternative areas for learning such as hair dressing, animal welfare, construction and car maintenance. Students clearly stated that they felt the subjects taught are much better and have improved over several years. Music appears to be a clear favourite for many; as one stated, 'We have great music here and band is even better!' This love of music was further supported during an excellent music lesson, which was taught in a vibrant, engaging and fun way which fully challenged and engaged all present.
- The school promotes positive relationships with parents, local schools, support agencies and a range of other alternative providers. Through links with other similar schools and the moderation opportunities these have provided, leaders have been able to build a more accurate measurement of progress over the past few years.
- Leaders make sure that all students have equal opportunities, as demonstrated by the high proportion of students who benefit from individual support so that they are all able to make equally good progress. Some of the funding from the pupil premium funding has also been used to allow all students full access to all parts of school life.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governance is good and the governing body has a clear understanding of its role. Individual governors have areas of responsibility, including teaching and learning, and finance. They find information for themselves from a range of sources including school visits and cross-reference this to make sure they have a clear and accurate picture of the school. Governors bring a range of expertise and use further training to close any gaps in their knowledge. They have a clear understanding of what is being taught and the effect it has on the overall provision provided in the school. They have established effective policies for the management of staff pay and understand how the effectiveness of teaching is measured, together with the links between this and teachers' pay, and how underperformance of staff is handled. They know how the quality of teaching and learning is measured, and how this is reflected in the evidence on students' progress. They carefully monitor the outcomes of initiatives and of targeted spending, such as the pupil premium funding. They are well aware of how the performance of their school compares with that of other special schools. All their legal duties, including safeguarding, are carried out very effectively and it is clear that they are a supportive but challenging part of the leadership team responsible for the Valley School.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	117669
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	425179

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	113
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Jacque Joyce
Headteacher	David Harrison
Date of previous school inspection	14 November 2011
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