

# The Observatory School

Bidston Village Road, Bidston, Prenton, CH43 7QT

## Inspection dates

21–22 November 2012

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	This inspection:	<b>Good</b>	<b>2</b>
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.

- Students usually arrive with educational standards well below those expected for their age. However, they make good progress and almost all gain qualifications before leaving.
- Having experienced great turmoil in their previous education the great majority do very well. They overcome difficulties, take part in school life and make great personal gains demonstrating outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
- Students make these gains because of the good teaching and high quality support of the staff who act as excellent role models.
- Students demonstrate good behaviour in class. Sometimes, their behaviour is outstanding because they understand and accept that staff expect the best of them.
- Students feel very safe at the school and when working at the alternative provision. They attend well and the majority find that they enjoy school for the first time.
- The curriculum enables all to succeed. Many students have an individual timetable and all can make choices in their studies.
- The new leadership team is good and some aspects of its management are outstanding. Following a recent very unsettled period the new headteacher has been instrumental in helping the school re-establish itself with a new and vigorous sense of purpose.
- The quality of teaching and learning is improving rapidly because of the good leadership and management.
- The governing body supports the school well. It knows its strengths and weaknesses and is fully involved in current developments.

### It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Teaching is not yet outstanding because teachers do not always fully explain to students what is expected of them in lessons, and some opportunities for students to make even better progress are missed.
- The school has not yet ensured that staff always use the same methods to help students improve their reading and writing skills.

## Information about this inspection

- The inspector spent almost three hours in classrooms and observed four teachers in four lessons. He made a number of additional short visits to classes, observed students going home and the lunchtime arrangements.
- The off-site alternative provision was visited to check the safeguarding arrangements for students and to see them at work.
- Students' records were examined together with samples of their work. The inspector heard students read as part of their class work.
- The inspector spoke with students from all age groups including those at the alternative provision to gain their views and opinions.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, middle managers including the English coordinator, teachers, other staff, two members of governing body and a representative of the local authority.
- The inspector met with two parents. He took further account of parents' views by examining the four responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View).
- The views of staff were noted through meeting them and by scrutinising their returned questionnaires.
- The work of the school was seen and documents concerning how it views its performance, planning, safeguarding, attendance and students' progress were examined.

## Inspection team

Terry McKenzie, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about this school

- The Observatory School admits boys and girls with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). A large majority experience additional learning difficulties such as autistic spectrum conditions and attention disorders.
- Students join the school at any age between 11 and 16 and all have a statement of special educational needs.
- Students come from all areas of The Wirral to attend and some travel long distances. The catchment area has some of the highest levels of deprivation in England. All but a very few students are known to be entitled to the pupil premium and this is extremely high compared to most other schools.
- There are more boys than girls and the ethnic backgrounds of the students are broadly representative of the local area.
- There are no formal partnerships but some occasional arrangements are made with other schools to support students. The Merseyside-based provider of alternative education known as Cornerstones is used by the school at its Birkenhead location. A few students attend here either full time or part time to study skills of the construction industry. Work experience is arranged for students as appropriate. None was occurring at the time of the inspection.
- Since the last inspection the school has experienced a period of great change in leadership and management. The previous headteacher resigned in May 2011. The then deputy headteacher was appointed as acting headteacher from November 2010 until April 2012, when they were then appointed as substantive headteacher. An acting assistant headteacher has been appointed as deputy headteacher and other changes have been made in the middle management of the school.
- In June 2011, the school received a visit from one of Her Majesty's Inspectors to find out about the quality of science teaching and learning in the school.

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further improve the rate at which students make progress in lessons by ensuring that teachers always provide them with clear information about what they are expected to achieve.
- Ensure that all students make the best possible improvements in their reading and writing skills by putting in place a whole-school policy for literacy that provides clear guidance to staff.

## Inspection judgements

### The achievement of pupils

**is good**

- From low starting points students begin to catch up with those in mainstream schools. In some lessons the older students aim for the higher grades in GCSE and their equivalents.
- The rate at which boys and girls make progress has increased every year since the last inspection because the quality of teaching has improved.
- While progress is good throughout the school for all groups of students there are some early indications that for younger students it is exceptional. It is likely that the majority of those currently in Year 9 will enter Key Stage 4 with standards much in line with national expectations.
- A member of Her Majesty's Inspectorate reported in 2011 that students make good progress in science and this is still the case. Science leads the way in the school but the progress that students make in English and mathematics is also good. The rate of progress made by students in other subjects is rapidly improving.
- Older students gain qualifications and accreditations at an increasing rate year-on-year. This is the same for those who attend the alternative provision who cannot manage the school environment.
- Students improve their reading and spelling and this is aided by the work of the member of staff who supports them. However, classroom staff have not coordinated well enough the methods they use to help students improve their reading and writing. In some lessons teachers do not plan fully to overcome the difficulties that some have with reading and students take longer to understand things as a result.
- In most lessons, while progress is good, teachers do not provide students with personal targets for learning to help them know exactly what is expected and how to improve.

### The quality of teaching

**is good**

- Teaching is good overall but some elements are outstanding. A very small proportion of the teaching requires improvement.
- Following a visit from a member of her Majesty's Inspectorate in 2011, the good work of the science department and its outstanding leadership were recognised as models of practice that others in the school should follow. This has been a major factor in helping the school to improve from the time of the last inspection.
- Teachers often provide activities that students respond to with great enthusiasm. Sometimes, they react exuberantly such as when a game of wheelchair basketball was being played by able-bodied students during a physical education lesson. Occasionally, their excitement for learning is very individual such as when a girl explained with great confidence to the inspector her analysis of the motives of Lady Macbeth.
- Teachers set learning targets for students as a matter of course and this is one of the improvements instigated by the new senior team. Targets help students to understand what to do but they are usually too broad and not clear enough. Consequently, students do not know exactly how to improve.
- Teachers' awareness is growing of the need to match the reading and writing parts of a lesson to the students' levels of ability. However, students are sometimes expected to listen for too long or read materials that are too difficult to understand. Nevertheless, the quality of teaching is rising rapidly because of the persistence of the senior team in checking and reviewing classroom work.
- The improving teaching results in some very high quality experiences for students such as in science. They report that they enjoy lessons because of the efforts of staff. Students talk openly about how teaching has improved in the last two years. Lessons are now much more business-like. They say that they appreciate the changes and the hard work of the teachers in improving

their lessons.

- This same view was reported by the parents that the inspector spoke with. They were certain that the standards of education have risen rapidly in the last two years.
- Teaching is better also because staff have been encouraged by managers to experiment with new courses and different ways of helping students to learn. This was evident in a mathematics lesson where one student was struggling to understand a concept. One of his classmates suggested: 'Think of how we would do this in engineering – it's the same thing!'

### **The behaviour and safety of pupils**

**are good**

- Students' behaviour is usually good or better. In the dining room behaviour can be outstanding. Behaviour slips when students have to listen to the teacher for too long.
- Students report that behaviour is getting better because staff manage it more effectively.
- Staff say that they have more confidence in dealing with very difficult behaviour. This is because they have been provided with high quality training that is matched to the needs of the school. Now, staff take the initiative about behaviour as was seen during a morning briefing when they discussed where difficult behaviour had occurred during the week and shared ideas to manage things better.
- Through new ways of managing behaviour there has been less need for staff to restrain students. The headteacher has adopted a 'zero tolerance' policy regarding outrageous behaviour. The policy is working and the culture of the school is changing.
- Students report that, because behaviour has improved the school is a much safer place. For example, there is no bullying because staff are always with the students. The parents who spoke with the inspector supported this view. Furthermore, the safer and more productive environment encourages students to attend. At the time of the last inspection attendance was extremely low but has improved rapidly to be almost in line with most other schools, which is a remarkable achievement for a school such as this.
- Students come here because they have been unable to manage in other schools. Their self-esteem and self-confidence are almost always low. They have usually been unsuccessful in their learning, often because of underlying difficulties in coping with reading and writing.
- Following integration the great majority enjoy learning. They build on each small success. Their self-confidence and self-esteem grow and they make great gains in personal developments. They understand about right and wrong, respect each other and appreciate the efforts of the adults.
- Most students are very proud of their school and demonstrate this by wearing uniform, attending regularly and managing their behaviour. At the time of the inspection all were a credit to themselves and the school. Thus, they make outstanding progress in their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

### **The leadership and management**

**are good**

- The present senior team was formed when the school was at a very low ebb. Nevertheless, in a short time their good leadership and management have been effective. There is great potential to improve the school further and a firm commitment by leaders to provide the highest quality education for the students.
- Staff morale is high because of the leadership of the headteacher. There is a clear sense of purpose shared by all.
- Senior leaders have reached out to parents, including appointing staff to help with links. Consequently, parents are more supportive of the school as is shown by some joining the governing body for the first time. The better relationship with families has encouraged students to attend more regularly.

- Training provided by managers has helped establish clearer boundaries for students so they feel safer. Staff feel more confident to intervene when necessary. They have learnt to track students' behaviour using effective systems. This helps them to understand more about students' behaviour and to prevent difficult situations from occurring.
- The senior team constantly examines the work of classrooms. Consequently, lessons are much more interesting and students contribute well. The curriculum is matched to students' individual needs and includes exciting elements such as engineering. All are included in learning and there are improving opportunities for students to move on to the next stages of their lives. For example, last year the majority went on to further education, training or employment.
- The pupil premium is used wisely to improve students' reading through providing a support assistant for literacy and through restocking the school library.
- Some management is outstanding, such as how the school reviews how well it is doing and the planning done to improve things. The headteacher ensures staff are kept informed about important decisions. The strengths and weaknesses of the school are discussed openly and transparently. Safeguarding is of a very high standard.
- With help from the local authority, the deputy headteacher has developed systems to show how well students are doing, including those attending the alternative provision, and what should be expected of them in future. This enables managers to see if any are falling behind so that extra help can be given. Effective local authority support has also been provided by the human resources department.
- **The governance of the school:**
  - The governing body knows the school well and provides good support and challenge to the headteacher. For example, members of the governing body are named in the school improvement plan so that each has a part to play. The Chair of the Governing Body visits the school each week to consult with staff. Members are fully involved in arrangements to improve the performance of staff. They have overseen the allocation of the pupil premium, ensured that the headteacher is working to challenging targets for improvement and that all requirements for safeguarding are met.

## 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

<b>Unique reference number</b>	127715
<b>Local authority</b>	Wirral
<b>Inspection number</b>	402409

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

<b>Type of school</b>	Special
<b>School category</b>	Community special
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–16
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	43
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	T Harney
<b>Headteacher</b>	E Idris
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	12 January 2010
<b>Telephone number</b>	0151 652 7093
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