

The Elms School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104497
Local authority	Knowsley
Inspection number	377091
Inspection dates	14–15 September 2011
Reporting inspector	Pauline Hilling-Smith

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	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	100
Of which number on roll in the sixth form	26
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Cllr Jackie Harris
Headteacher	Linda Lowe
Date of previous school inspection	19 November 2008
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. The inspectors observed teaching and learning in 14 lessons given by 12 teachers. Meetings were held with pupils, partners, representatives of the governing body and staff. Inspectors observed the school's work, looked at the school's evaluation of its performance, the current development plan, minutes of meetings of the governing body and safeguarding documentation. The responses to 42 questionnaires from parents and carers were also analysed.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- The progress of all groups of pupils towards their targets, especially girls, younger pupils and those with complex needs.
- How well the curriculum and teaching promote the learning and personal development needs of pupils, especially in the Early Years Foundation Stage and in the sixth form.
- How effectively leaders are bringing about school improvement and how the school is supported by its partners.

Information about the school

The Elms is an average-sized special school with specialist school designation for communication and interaction. Pupils have a wide range of complex learning, physical, sensory and communication difficulties. The majority of pupils in the school are boys and most are White British. Every pupil has a statement of special educational needs. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is well above average. The school provides an outreach service for pupils with autism and social communication difficulties to all schools in the northern area of the local authority. The school has been awarded Healthy School status, Investors in People Artsmark (Silver), Activemark, ECO Environment (Silver), Sportsmark, National Autistic Society Accreditation and also holds the International School Award.

Since the previous inspection, the governing body has been formally federated with that of a neighbouring special school in readiness for amalgamation and a move to a new site in September 2012. The headteacher of the new school has been appointed as executive headteacher of The Elms. At the same time, the headteacher of The Elms became the associate headteacher and a further assistant headteacher joined the two assistant headteachers appointed in September 2010.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory and 4 is inadequate
Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

This is an outstanding school. Pupils benefit greatly from the excellent collaboration with other schools and colleges in the local area. Arrangements for care, guidance and support are outstanding and they enable pupils to make the most of the opportunities the school offers. The way in which partnerships contribute to the curriculum is exemplary. The curriculum is outstanding because it meets individual needs exceptionally well. As a result, pupils' achievement is good overall and often better in personal development. There are numerous opportunities for pupils to be independent and take on positions of responsibility, thus raising their confidence and self-esteem.

The governing body is exceptionally strong and its drive and clarity of vision are shared by all. The expertise of each member of the large governing body is capitalised on exceptionally well. The newly-established leadership team has refreshed the strong vision for the school and has maintained high morale within the staff team who share the ambition to increase further the rate of progress for every pupil.

Accurate self-evaluation gives school leaders a clear view of strengths and areas for improvement. It is robust because the views of all involved in the school are taken into account. Staff have a good level of expertise and understanding of how to develop the learning of those pupils with complex needs and learning difficulties. Although the quality of teaching is good and sometimes outstanding, on occasion pupils' progress slows when lessons fail to move their learning on at a fast enough rate. This particularly impacts on the more-able pupils. The headteacher and senior staff are aware that further steps need to be taken to increase the proportion of outstanding teaching and have a very clear understanding of how this can be achieved. Actions taken so far have been very effective. All this demonstrates that there is outstanding capacity to sustain improvement.

Attendance is above average. Inspectors are confident that the school is doing all it can to ensure that pupils can spend as much time as possible devoted to extending their learning.

Everyone at The Elms shows a deep understanding and respect for individual differences. Meeting individual needs and equality of opportunity for all are at the heart of everything that the school does.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all teaching is good or better by planning activities that challenge and engage pupils of all abilities, especially the more able.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

All groups of pupils make good progress overall. Pupils enjoy coming to school and, consequently, achievement is good. Progress in social development is often outstanding because skills in communication are well attended to in lessons as well as at other times during the school day. Behaviour is outstanding because expert support staff observe pupils carefully and meet their needs swiftly. For example, in an outstanding Year 10 lesson, pupils learned how to make choices about what kind of work they would like to do when they leave school. They were consistently supported in fully communicating the basis for their choice to their partner. In another good lesson, pupils used all their senses when they baked cakes and communicated using signs, sounds, pictures and words. Pupils particularly enjoy lessons in sport.

Procedures to establish where the pupils are in their learning when they start at The Elms show that most pupils arrive with low or very low skills. Although pupils make good progress, the steps they take in their learning are very small and so their attainment is not judged against the national average but against benchmarks appropriate to their needs. During their time at The Elms, pupils make good progress in English and mathematics because staff track pupils' progress carefully and set new targets each term. Pupils with additional or more complex learning needs, and girls, also make good progress towards the targets set for them.

Parents and carers agree with pupils when they say they feel extremely safe and secure. Pupils know they are listened to, as they can take their views, such as those about school uniform, to meetings of the governing body and can see decisions made by their council put into practice. Pupils develop vocational skills alongside peers from a mainstream school and this, together with their good attendance, makes a very strong contribution to the outstanding development of skills to promote their future well-being. Pupils further develop their understanding of different cultures when they visit a range of places of worship and take part in residential visits overseas.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	*
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2

¹The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

* In some special schools inspectors do not make a judgement about attainment in relation to expectations of the pupils' age.

The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

The teaching and learning in the large majority of lessons are good or outstanding. However, in a minority of lessons, learning slows because pupils spend too much time listening to the teacher and the pace of lessons is too slow. In good and better lessons, teaching promotes pupils' positive attitudes and a good aptitude for learning. As a result, work produced by the pupils is of high quality. In the best lessons, the considerable expertise of the teaching assistants is used well to move learning on as well as to support behaviour. In these lessons, learning proceeds at a faster pace and meets the pupils' learning needs very well. Teachers have good knowledge of their subjects and plan conscientiously. In the satisfactory lessons, planning is not always sharp enough to address the needs of pupils at different levels, especially the more-able, by specifying different activities for the varying ability groups. Pupils know their individual targets and are clear about what they need to do to improve because all staff give good clear information to pupils about how well they are doing. Electronic whiteboards are used to good effect.

The curriculum is outstanding. It is innovative and flexible and as such meets the needs of all the pupils exceptionally well. It is creative in the way community resources are used to bring learning alive. A strength of the curriculum is the opportunity for residential visits, both at home and overseas, and for extended experiences after school and on out-of-school activities and visits. These enable pupils to develop their ideas and apply them in a range of contexts. Personal, social and health education is also a strength, and plays a significant part in pupils' very impressive personal development and well-being.

Staff, partners and parents and carers work exceptionally well together and in teams to support the pupils' well-being. Relationships are supportive and warm and pupils seek help with ease. Pupils, including those with very significant needs, have great confidence in the adults around them and, consequently, make significant progress in their personal development. Pupils are greeted by staff with great care to ensure they feel welcome every day. Links with other agencies are used very effectively to support pupils and their families in making choices for the future. Working together with peers in mainstream schools and colleges is very effective in promoting learning and personal development. Transition planning for all pupils at every stage of their school life is outstanding.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher is highly effective. She is pivotal in dovetailing the strengths and expertise of the governing body with the composition and experience of the senior leadership team in school. As there has inevitably been a period of leadership change, especially over the last 18 months, the headteacher's successful building of very effective leadership teams has enabled the school to move forward in harmony. Excellent quality professional development has ensured that the assistant headteachers, although a relatively new team, share the vision and high expectations. Building on effective collaboration with the executive headteacher, the new permanent arrangements have brought an additional layer of support and expertise to The Elms, especially in the area of setting ambitious targets for pupils' progress. Monitoring arrangements are thorough and include members of the governing body. Observations of teaching lead to detailed evaluations that celebrate strengths and point out aspects in need of further development. However, the number of less-experienced teachers has grown recently and the observation of these teachers has been less extensive.

Procedures for identifying what the school does well and what it needs to do to improve are robust and accurate. This ensures that improvement is maintained. The composition of the governing body reflects the needs of the school very well and this enables members to support and challenge the work of the school effectively. The governing body plays a full part in strategic direction and development. Effective induction of new members enables them to contribute fully to the work of the school. Training for all staff is seen as a priority and this has impacted well on improvement. The Elms is also a recognised Leadership Development School for trainee headteachers. Processes for tracking students' progress are carefully designed and enable clear identification of progress. Students' targets, reviewed and adjusted frequently, are communicated regularly to parents and carers.

Partnership with parents and carers is outstanding because there are strong links with families. Class teachers are in regular contact by telephone or through the home-school diary, many parents' and carers' workshops are held in school and the governing body has procedures in place to seek the views of the large majority of parents and carers. Procedures for safeguarding and health and safety are outstanding due to very robust arrangements for child protection, the careful assessment of safety in the wide range of locations in which students may learn and the commitment of the school to training all the staff to a high level in the management of pupils' behaviour. Highly-developed partnerships play a very effective part in improving learning for all students and contribute substantially to their well-being. The school's outreach work and extended school programme contribute well to local community cohesion. Community work, as part of the Duke of

Edinburgh’s Award Scheme, enables pupils to make a meaningful contribution to national and international projects. The outstanding commitment of leaders to ensure that the school is active in placing equality and diversity at the heart of its work is seen in the highly-inclusive arrangements in school and collaborative settings.

These are the grades for the leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Early Years Foundation Stage

The number of children joining the school during the Reception Year is very small and they join the others in the Key Stage 1 classroom. However, the indoor and outside provision is arranged so that children can involve themselves in the learning areas of their choice. Teaching and the curriculum promote children’s learning and personal development exceptionally well. The classroom, both indoors and out, is attractive and well-organised so children involve themselves with delight in learning. They know that after they have completed a task set by an adult they will be able to choose to have some time in their own very special interest, such as Doctor Who books and models. In one much-enjoyed lesson, when children poured water down gutters outside, counted real objects or used the mouse to select icons on the computer, members of staff worked very well as a team and skilfully extended each child’s mathematical language.

The leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage are outstanding because the provision is well-organised and creative with careful attention paid to development planning. Partnership with parents and carers is a particular strength because the assistant headteacher arranges a comprehensive programme of visits for children, key staff and parents and carers so that transition to The Elms is very smooth and stress-free. As a result, children make a flying start to their learning.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation stage	1
Taking into account: Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1

The effectiveness of leadership and management in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
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Sixth form

The sixth form caters for students who join from other special and mainstream schools as well as from The Elms. Provision is highly-personalised, which means that individual needs are met exceptionally well and that students’ outcomes are outstanding as a result. Almost all students carry on to further training or employment when they leave school. Transition planning for each individual is very well-developed. The range of accredited courses is very wide and The Elms acts as a hub for entering students for accreditations from other sixth forms. Training for staff to lead verification of accreditation is seen as a priority. This means that the breadth of qualifications can be maintained. Partnership with parents, carers and other agencies is exemplary and contributes well to the well-being of the students. Development planning is very effective and looks to the future so that provision can be maintained and enhanced. For example, painting and decorating panels have been installed in the sixth-form area to enable students to learn painting and decorating skills at The Elms because the college course is not running. Residential visits enable students to develop their confidence and independence and some students are able to stay away from home for the first time.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth Form	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	1
The quality of provision in the sixth form	1
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

Views of parents and carers

Forty-one per cent of parents and carers responded to the questionnaire. The overwhelming majority were positive and inspection findings endorse these views. A very few returns expressed some concerns about how parents and carers were enabled to help their children in their learning. These areas were followed up by inspectors who found that pupils made good progress and that the evidence showed that the school paid careful attention during the annual review process to giving explanations to parents and carers about how to support their children’s learning.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at The Elms School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 42 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 106 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	28	67	12	29	0	0	1	2
The school keeps my child safe	29	69	10	24	2	5	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	21	50	16	38	0	0	1	2
My child is making enough progress at this school	21	50	18	43	1	2	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	29	69	10	24	1	2	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	24	57	11	26	2	5	2	5
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	23	55	16	38	1	2	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well-prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	21	50	16	38	0	0	2	5
The school meets my child's particular needs	26	62	13	31	1	2	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	21	50	17	40	0	0	1	2
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	23	55	15	36	1	2	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	26	62	12	29	0	0	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	27	64	12	29	1	2	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	43	47	10	0
Primary schools	6	46	42	6
Secondary schools	14	36	41	9
Sixth forms	15	42	41	3
Special schools	30	48	19	3
Pupil referral units	14	50	31	5
All schools	10	44	39	6

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above is for the period 1 September 2010 to 08 April 2011 and is consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add up exactly to 100. Sixth-form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



16 September 2011

Dear Pupils and Students

Inspection of The Elms School, Liverpool, L28 1RX

Thank you for being so welcoming to us when we inspected your school. We enjoyed talking with you and visiting lessons. We were impressed by how polite and well-behaved you are. Thank you for taking the time to give us your views of the school. It was clear from talking together and the questionnaire replies we received from you and your parents and carers that you feel safe at school and are confident that the staff quickly help you if needed.

We judge that The Elms is an outstanding school because the members of the governing body and the headteacher and all the staff make sure that you have the very best opportunities. In fact, they are making sure that you have a lovely new school and that your ideas are taken into consideration in all the planning. You are making good progress in learning and your personal development is excellent because the staff are very skilful in helping you to understand how to do as well as you can.

We have asked the teachers to do one thing to make The Elms even better. It is to make sure that activities in lessons involve you all doing work at just the right level of difficulty.

We know you will all try to do everything you can to help your teachers and encourage each other to do well. We wish you every success in your future.

Yours sincerely

Pauline Hilling-Smith
Lead inspector

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