

Inspection report

Stepping Stones School

Independent special school

DfES ref no: 936/6584

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 7 – 10 Nov 2005

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002 in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

Stepping Stones School was registered by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in September 2004 and is also a charitable trust. It is a day special school for up to 25 secondary age pupils, aged from 11 to 16 years, with hemiplegia and other moderate physical or learning difficulties. At the time of the inspection there were three pupils on roll. The head teacher had been in post since September 2005.

The school mission statement is *'....to provide a stimulating, caring and friendly learning environment, which will maximise the pupils' educational opportunities and their potential for independence'*.

Summary of main findings

Stepping Stones is a very good school that benefits from the clear vision and determination of its proprietor, management and trustees. It complies with all but three of the requirements for registration. It has made very good progress in its development since it was first registered because of the dedication and commitment of all staff. It fully achieves its mission statement. Staff have excellent relationships with pupils which result in a positive atmosphere throughout the school. This warmth and care is a significant feature of the provision. However, the school has not yet enabled the nominated member of staff for child protection to undertake the required training; this matter is in hand. Teaching is good and, along with good support by the learning support assistants (LSAs), it enables pupils to learn effectively. Pupils clearly enjoy learning. Provision for their personal development is outstanding. This enables them to thrive and grow in an atmosphere that encourages and celebrates their success. The school provides an effective curriculum, although assessment of learning is a weakness. The curriculum is being re-developed to more closely match the needs of pupils. This, along with a more cohesive assessment practice needs further work.

What the school does well:

- it provides good teaching, supported by effective lesson planning, which enables pupils to make good progress;
- it provides a low-stress atmosphere, based on concerned care, which stimulates in pupils an enthusiasm to work hard and become independent learners;

- it has formed good links with other schools which impact well on pupils' personal and academic development;
- it closely monitors pupils' welfare and well-being and encourages them to adopt a healthy lifestyle;
- it offers many challenging opportunities for pupils which develop their interest in learning; and
- it nurtures pupils' social confidence so that they become self-assured young people.

What the school must do in order to comply with the regulations:

- provide for teachers to gain a better understanding of pupils' aptitudes and attainment and use a framework which regularly assesses pupils' work, as outlined in section 1 of this report; and
- improve the policies which safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils as identified in section 3.

Next Steps

Whilst not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following point for development:

- ensure that skills in literacy and numeracy are developed more securely throughout the curriculum.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The school succeeds in its aim to offer a broad and balanced curriculum. It provides a full range of subjects with the exception of a modern foreign language. The provision for information and communication technology (ICT) is very good. The planning for some subjects, such as design and technology and science, is inhibited through the lack of on-site facilities. The school has identified this as a weakness and the trustees have agreed plans to use the facilities of a local school.

It is a good feature of the curriculum that teachers provide personalised learning opportunities for each pupil. The requirements of each pupil's statement of special educational need (SEN) are met. The personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum is a strong element of the wider curriculum.

Literacy and numeracy skills are developed well. These are taught as separate subjects but the learning achieved in these lessons could usefully be more deliberately planned into other areas of learning. This occurs in some lessons but it is not a consistent feature.

Pupils arrive early at the school and are at work by 8.40 a.m. They remain hard at work until they leave at 4.00 p.m. Despite the length of the day, lessons are paced well and little time is lost.

Most subjects have appropriate schemes of work that enable teachers to provide clear progression in learning. Other schemes were in place at the time of first registration but the school realised that these did not closely reflect the needs of the pupils who were admitted. They are undergoing change.

As with the curriculum, the provision for individual education plans (IEP) is also under development. The current IEPs are too restrictive in their content. They do not readily secure pupils' progress in their wider learning and personal development. The school management has realised this and is actively changing the format and content to more accurately support the needs identified within the statements of special educational need.

Curriculum development is at present undertaken by the head teacher. The school might consider devolving some of the subject responsibilities to other staff who would be able to bring their particular expertise to the exercise and also speed up the improvement.

Links between pupils' homes and the school are very good. These augment the work done within school day and ensure that parents are also very supportive of school activities. This consistency enhances pupils' progress.

The school has formed a beneficial link with a commercial ICT company to develop a '*virtual classroom*'. This link enables pupils at Stepping Stones to become part of a

larger group as well as to expand their horizons and increase their knowledge of the world.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching is good. This partly compensates for the limitations in curriculum planning. It enables pupils to develop their understanding in a broad range of subjects. The teaching of literacy and numeracy is particularly good because pupils receive individual help where any difficulties are encountered. For example, in English they empathised well with the characters in '*Lord of the Flies*'. In a geography lesson they used their skills in research and argument to put forward a case on behalf of eco-tourism.

Teaching is effective and impacts well on learning. Lessons are planned well and they are intensive periods of learning. Common aspects of lessons are good pace and timing of activities, the use of role-play, skilful questioning and providing pupils with the time in which to consider their replies.

A further good feature of teaching is the contribution made by learning support assistants (LSAs). The contributions they make are included fully within each lesson and they provide very good support, which enhances pupils' achievements. The quality of their support is enhanced by their skill in knowing when to provide help and when to hold back.

The trustees have assembled a small group of teachers who bring strong expertise and knowledge to their teaching. These attributes are used to effectively challenge pupils. A weakness is, however, that not all teachers are sure of the prior attainment of each pupil. Consequently they do not always provide the most appropriate work for each pupil. There are occasions where pupils of different key stages study the same material.

Education reports are not substantiated by reference to objective evidence, such as National Curriculum levels or norm-referenced data. Pupils receive very good feedback on their work. The marking of work is a strong feature, which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of individual pieces and provides good advice to pupils on how they might improve. However, this information is not always considered in the planning for subsequent lessons. The school has recently become a recognised examination centre. When the first pupils sit for public examinations in 2007 the school will then have data that will enable it to compare its performance against similar schools.

Pupils clearly enjoy learning. The enthusiasm they bring to this means they achieve well. They arrive at lessons on time and eager to learn. They tackle tasks with enthusiasm and show great confidence in questioning anything they do not understand. This confidence is based on the excellent relationships they have with their teachers and LSAs, all of whom are patient and precise in their explanations.

An outstanding feature is that pupils take full responsibility for their own learning. In every sense they are becoming independent learners. Teachers and support staff do not intervene when they judge that pupils can achieve on their own. This is very

evident, for example, when pupils use the high quality computer facility to research the internet and also draft and re-draft their work. Their achievements in computer work are of a particularly high order. They show considerable confidence and skill, for example having produced good quality video creations and used the themes within these to re-create stories in the format of a comic.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school meets all but two of the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply fully with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *enable teachers to gain a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensure these are taken into account in the planning of lessons (paragraph 1(3)(d)); and*
- *put in place a framework to assess pupils' work regularly and thoroughly and use information from such assessment to plan teaching so that pupils can make progress (paragraph 1(3)(g)).*

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

A stated aim of the school is to *'enhance pupils' knowledge and understanding of life so they can face the future with confidence in their own abilities'*. It fully achieves this.

A very good range of opportunities is provided which enable pupils to develop self-confidence and belief in their own abilities. At a basic level, these opportunities include making their own lunches once each week. At a higher level, opportunities are provided through their involvement in the organisation of a *'Hemi-help'* charity day. In lessons, they consider their place in the world and how they might affect the outcomes of global issues such as eco-tourism. Discussion with pupils shows that they believe the education at Stepping Stones to be an enjoyable experience - a further indicator of their growing self-belief.

Provision for moral development is very good. The impact of this is that pupils clearly know the difference between right and wrong and have internalised the values which underpin this. The staff provide excellent role models in this regard. It is significant that records, such as the school incident book and record of sanctions, have no entries. The behaviour management system is very good because it emphasises positive behaviour and encourages pupils to emulate this. In all areas of the school's work they are encouraged to consider the impact of their actions on others.

The provision for social development is excellent. Much of the physical education provision takes place in community facilities, such as a local sailing club. Other ventures, such as a residential week in partnership with another school and a fashion show, which featured their art and design work, provide opportunities for pupils to extend their social skills. The latter event was a venture along with four

other schools. Pupils frequently join with other schools for events such as a drug-awareness course and music assemblies. This ensures that they do not become socially isolated within their small school.

The school successfully encourages pupils' understanding of different cultures, as well as their own. They have a good understanding of the diverse nature of such cultures. This is aided by the fact that some are already international travellers in their own right. The school capitalises on these experiences to extend the awareness of all pupils. At a local level the school provides opportunities within its religious education curriculum to study other religions, such as Sikhism. In other subjects, such as music, pupils have become familiar with the musical styles of other cultures; geography also provides them with a further window on world cultures. Their knowledge of the local community is further enhanced through presentations and visits by local police and the fire service.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

Pupils' welfare and well-being are safeguarded consistently. Staff are attentive to pupils' needs at all stages of the school day. The small number of pupils means they receive very good levels of attention but this is provided sensitively and never becomes overbearing. Pupils appear genuinely happy to be at the school; a fact confirmed by discussion with them. One described the school as '*..... much better than where I was at the last school*'.

All of the required policies are in place. The child protection policy is adequate but it does not fully reflect current guidance, particularly in reference to obligations on proprietors of independent schools. There is a nominated child protection person but this member of staff has not had training. This oversight by the school is being remedied and there is a firm date agreed for this person to attend training. Also, the policy does not identify other requirements, such as the need for all staff to have training in awareness of child protection issues or that the proprietor should annually review the procedures and report on their effectiveness.

The trustees have gone to considerable lengths to ensure that the building is a very safe place. Levels of staff supervision and vigilance are also very good. This is carried out in a relaxed manner, which belies its effectiveness.

Risk assessments have been carried out thoroughly. There is a written First Aid policy that provides guidance for staff in the event of a medical emergency. This policy is further enhanced by the presence, throughout the day, of a qualified First-Aider. Policies, such as that referring to visits away from the school, are rigorously implemented. Attendance and admission registers are maintained appropriately. The admission register contains all the required detail, though it could usefully be kept in a format more substantial than a loose-leaf file. Options such as a bound book or computer file could be considered.

Regular testing of fire alarms and other precautions is carried out and where concerns are noted these are immediately remedied. The provision and premises comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. The trustees have very closely considered these latter requirements in the renovation of the building.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school meets all but one of the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *prepare and implement a written policy to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are pupils at the school in compliance with DfES guidance (paragraph 3(2)(b)).*

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

There are effective systems in place to ensure the suitability of staff. Thorough checks are made prior to the confirmation of any appointment, which would include contact with pupils.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

The school is a listed building, which has been converted appropriately for educational use. The fittings and fixtures are of a high standard and much thought has gone in to providing facilities, which promote the independence of pupils. The theme of independence pervades the accommodation. Fine details, such as special lighting and colour-coded doors, consider the needs of pupils who may be photo-sensitive to fluorescent lighting or who may have a visual impairment.

Facilities such as the computer suite considerably enhance the achievements of pupils. The school lacks some specialist facilities, such as those for art, science or craft and design. However, the trustees have made successful links with local schools, which will enable Stepping Stones pupils to have access to such facilities.

There is a pleasant garden with smooth pathways along which pupils can safely walk or use the three-wheeled scooters, which the school provides. The garden contains purpose-built play areas; these also include quieter areas where pupils can relax during breaks from lessons. Areas such as the vegetable garden are used well to enhance learning in topics such as food studies.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

The prospectus provided to parents and others is very readable and provides all necessary information. The trustees are very active in disseminating information about the school to a wider audience. Parents are satisfied that the school keeps them well informed about the progress of their child.

Where pupils have a statement of SEN the reports relating to this are provided to local authorities. Annual reports to parents could be further improved through inclusion of objective data to quantify the good progress made by pupils.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints

The complaints policy is comprehensive and clear. All parents who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire agreed that they understood the school's procedures for dealing with complaints.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of school:	Stepping Stones School
DfES Number:	936/6584
Type of school:	Special, for pupils with hemiplegia and other moderate physical and learning difficulties
Status:	Independent
Age range of pupils:	11 – 16 years
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys: 2 Girls: 1 Total: 3
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys: 1 Girls: 1 Total: 2
Annual fees (day pupils):	£12,000
Address of school:	Tower Road Hindhead Surrey GU26 6SU
Telephone number:	01428 609083
Email address:	enquiries@steppingstones.org.uk
Headteacher:	Mr Michael Simms
Proprietor:	Mr Larry Sullivan
Reporting Inspector:	Mr Tom Smith
Date of inspection:	7 – 10 November 2005

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