

Dacorum Education Support Centre

30 Tenzing Road, Hemel Hempstead, HP2 4HS

Inspection dates

23–24 January 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Outstanding	1
	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- The work of all leaders and managers is exceptionally good. The centre is very well run.
- Staff are proud of the immediate response they give to any event or request for help.
- All aspects of the centre's work, including teaching and students' achievement, are thoroughly and regularly reviewed so that immediate action can be taken if necessary.
- Students' achievement is outstanding. They catch up quickly because teaching is outstanding, and their attendance, behaviour and personal development improve sharply.
- The outreach service is extremely successful in preventing students from being excluded from mainstream school, and supporting their return.
- The centre and outreach service are very highly regarded. The local authority and partner schools are full of praise for their work.
- The centre works in very close partnership with parents and carers. They are very pleased with the change they see in their children.
- The centre is very forward-looking. It takes on interesting and exciting new projects, such as The Prince's Trust course, to interest students and help them more.
- The centre's work and responsibilities have expanded over the past few years. However, they no longer match the local authority's written guidance for such centres.
- The support, guidance, subjects and activities provided are all closely tailored to each individual student's needs.
- The centre uses additional providers, for instance for motor mechanics, carefully and successfully to increase the range of activities offered.
- Students say that they enjoy learning at the centre and that it suits them very well. Many are reluctant to leave.
- The centre's saying that students 'come with a past but leave with a future' is true. Almost all younger students return to mainstream school successfully. Older students finish their education at the centre and gain better qualifications than previously expected.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 10 lessons or parts of lessons over both sites.
- Meetings took place with students and a range of adults including the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the assistant headteacher (also in charge of the outreach service) the centre's inclusion and programmes manager, teaching and other staff, headteachers of local schools, and members of the management committee. A telephone conversation was held with a representative of the local authority.
- The inspectors examined a range of documents on students' attendance, progress and behaviour; how students are kept safe; how teaching is planned; governance; and how teachers are supported and trained.
- The five responses to Parent View, the online questionnaire for parents and carers, were taken into account along with the school's own surveys of parents and carers' views.
- The views given in the 28 staff questionnaire were also considered.

Inspection team

Judith Charlesworth, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Hermione Horn

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The Dacorum Education Support Centre (DESC) has two functions, as a pupil referral unit known as 'the centre' and as an outreach service.
- The centre has two sites. Students in Key Stage 3 are based in small purpose-built premises located in a suburb of Hemel Hempstead. Students in Key Stage 4 are based in a suite of rooms in West Hertfordshire College of Further Education, located in the middle of town. This base is due to relocate to newly refurbished premises in September 2013. The centre has recently taken responsibility for The Prince's Trust XL programme and its staff. This is located at West Hertfordshire College.
- The centre provides for students who have been excluded from mainstream school or who are in transition prior to joining another mainstream school; those who are at risk of exclusion; and those who need short-term 'respite' from their school to stabilise their behaviour.
- Most students are on the roll of both the centre and their mainstream school.
- Students' stay at the centre is flexible, depending on their needs. Most students in Key Stage 3 return to mainstream school in less than a year. Most students at Key Stage 4 complete their education at the centre and move on to college, training or work.
- No students currently have a statement of special educational needs, but all have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.
- Almost all students are from White British backgrounds. A very small proportion of students are from minority ethnic heritages.
- An above-average proportion of students are known to be eligible for the pupil premium, which is extra government funding for certain groups of learners. Almost all of these students are known to be eligible for free school meals.
- The centre uses external providers to extend the range of subjects, options and support it provides for students. These include: The Paradise Project, Hayden Training, the Lifestyle Gym, Herts Desires, Speak Easy Support, and XERS.
- The outreach service operates from the Key Stage 3 building. It provides support to 56 primary, nine secondary and two middle schools in the Dacorum area of Hertfordshire. Its main aims are to prevent students from being permanently excluded and to improve their behaviour and achievement by offering them, their parents and carers, and school staff support and advice.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- The centre should work closely with the local authority to redefine and clarify its roles and responsibilities, taking full account of local and national developments.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

is outstanding

- Students' skills at age 11 have usually been below the levels expected for their age and their progress in Key Stage 3 generally slow, so that their skills are often well below average by the time they join the centre. Students' skills in reading and writing tend to be lower than in mathematics.
- Most students make progress in English and mathematics at double the rate expected nationally, and so they catch up quickly. The centre supports reading and writing throughout all lessons. For instance, students read and discuss passages from textbooks and write full sentences in all subjects. Students say they particularly enjoy mathematics because teaching is 'different' from what they have experienced before. As a result they become interested in mathematics again and make up for lost time.
- Most students exceed the targets set for them. Younger students, for example, reach higher levels than initially predicted on the basis of their past work. Students at Key Stage 4 achieve better grades in GCSE examinations than most students nationally who are at the same level at the end of Key Stage 3.
- Students are not entered early for GCSE examinations. However, they are entered for Entry Level and Functional Skills qualifications whenever they are ready. Students at Key Stage 4 also achieve qualifications in other subjects such as GCSE art, drama and statistics, and BTEC awards in construction, childcare and sport. Students return to mainstream schools or move to college, work or training with a portfolio of qualifications which raises their confidence and self-esteem.
- The centre closely reviews all students' progress. There is no difference in the progress of different groups of students, such as those who are on 'respite' and those who attend for longer, or those known to be eligible for free school meals. Any differences in achievement are due to individuals' particular circumstances, which may be short-term or long-term.
- Students almost always behave very well in lessons and show real interest in what they are doing. An excellent example of this was the discussion generated by two Year 8 students in a lesson about human rights, slavery and child labour. Their maturity and considered questioning about this difficult subject were exemplary.

The quality of teaching

is outstanding

- Outstanding teaching results in students' outstanding achievement and personal development. Excellent systems for checking on and tracking students' developing skills help staff to give each one work that is demanding. Very small groups or individual teaching help fulfil two of the centre's aims: to let 'learners learn and teachers teach' and to 'be the best that you can be'.
- Lessons are interesting and no time is wasted. Students are encouraged to check their own learning, which helps to develop their independence, and are very well supported to grasp new concepts. Questioning and discussion are used extremely well to do this. Students' existing skills and knowledge are reinforced and extended, and new information is carefully explained and practised. As a result, students make quick progress in lessons.
- Consideration for students' personal development is shown in all teaching. For example, in

cooking, students were reminded at the start of the lesson to ask for help instead of getting cross, and to compliment one another. When they did these things, they received a tick which contributed to their 'point scores'.

- Teaching assistants are used very well to support learning. Sometimes they work alongside students, which encourages them and takes away the spotlight of individual attention. This was observed in an outstanding art lesson, where the students and teaching assistant worked together to develop an abstract painting using wax-resist in a very relaxed, but information-packed lesson.
- Literacy and numeracy are very well taught. Literacy is particularly well taught through other subjects. A significant amount of recent training and changes to staff have contributed to improvement in teaching, and achievement in reading and writing. Speaking and listening are reinforced strongly in subjects such as personal and social education and drama. In mathematics, students are encouraged to exceed their targets and apply their developing skills to solving problems.
- Students' behaviour is expertly managed. Mostly, they behave very well. However, if a student becomes distracted, teachers bring their attention back to the task with firmness but without confrontation. As a result, students generally follow instructions willingly. They cooperate and often support one another. This was observed at The Princes Trust, where a more-able student quietly helped a fellow student with her writing.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Students join the centre because they have difficulties which prevent them from settling comfortably and learning in school. The centre has outstanding systems for managing students' behaviour and for providing support and guidance for them and their families. This includes working with other professionals if necessary. As a result, students' behaviour and attitudes to learning improve rapidly. Parents and carers are very pleased with this improvement.
- Students are generally open and honest, and recognise their own difficulties and the improvements they have made. They enjoy the close relationships they develop with staff and the fact that their views are asked for and listened to. They enjoy the small teaching groups and the individual attention they receive, and recognise their benefits.
- Students are confident in the staff and say they would turn to them if in need. Some students find that the centre is a safer place to be than other situations they have been in. As students' feelings of well-being, self-esteem and ability to cope in an educational setting improve, so does their educational achievement.
- In this safe environment, there are very few incidents of bullying or racism. Students understand the dangers of substance abuse and violence, including knife crime, and say they do 'lots of this' in personal, social and health education. Students know that there are consequences to both good and bad behaviour, and prefer to work towards rewards of their choice. Any incidents or reluctance to work are sorted out by negotiation, such as an offer to talk things through with a life coach or learning mentor.
- Only a few students who come to the centre have previously had adequate attendance. The system for improving it is excellent. Staff reinforce the close link between attendance and achievement, follow up absence thoroughly and support students in getting to school, for example by giving them an alarm clock. Improvement is rewarded and parents and carers are told about it in weekly phone calls. As a result of these measures, students' attendance improves

considerably.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- Senior leaders have a very strong drive to improve the DESC. This is fully supported by the management committee and the staff, who are proud to belong to the DESC community. Every aspect of the DESC's work is thoroughly checked and evaluated. The results are presented as excellent, easy to understand information that underpins very good plans for improvement.
- The leaders and managers are very forward-looking and take every opportunity to develop the DESC. For example, the centre has taken on the very effective Princes Trust course that operates from the West Hertfordshire college base, as it was due to close. It has recently won a grant to operate a nurture group within a partner primary school to help young pupils before their problems become too severe. These developments have had the full support of the local authority. However, the DESC's responsibilities and working practices no longer match the local authority's written guidance for its education support centres.
- Teachers' work is closely and regularly checked, and demanding targets are set for their development. Any teaching that requires improvement is quickly tackled by support, training and, if necessary, by following local authority procedures. Wednesday afternoons are set aside for high-level training, and individual training for those with specific roles or interests is also supported. As a result, staff are very effective and well trained, and up-to-date in their practice.
- Students study a range of interesting, relevant subjects and topics that support their personal and academic development. They learn about the history of our modern, democratic, multicultural society by studying topics such as Black history and human rights. At Key Stage 3, the emphasis is on helping students to catch up in literacy and numeracy, improve their behaviour and return to mainstream school as soon as possible. At Key Stage 4, it is on gaining appropriate, demanding qualifications so that students can have a brighter future.
- Each student has a timetable that is constructed to meet their particular learning needs and interests. Alternative education providers are used for additional courses such as construction or motor vehicle studies. Students' attendance, safety and progress at these activities are very carefully checked to make sure they continue to be valuable and effective.
- The DESC has outstanding partnerships with parents and carers. Close working arrangements are made directly by staff, for example through the link tutor's weekly telephone calls, and through the DESC's family worker. The views of parents and carers are sought regularly in person, through questionnaires, and through Parent View.
- The local authority provides 'light touch' support to this outstanding pupil referral unit. Nevertheless, the DESC benefits from the local authority's many supportive systems, such as the annual safeguarding audit to make sure all requirements and practices are fully up to date.
- The outreach service is outstanding. It is run and managed exceptionally well. The service works in close collaboration with schools to identify and support individuals so that they remain in mainstream education as far as possible, or that transfers to the centre are planned carefully rather than arranged in a hurry. Communication with schools about their students is exemplary. Schools say that they could not do their job without the support of the outreach service. The service works in close partnership with the centre. Students who might need to attend are identified well in advance, and they are strongly supported by the outreach service on their return to mainstream education.

■ The governance of the school:

- The management committee provides excellent challenge and support. Its members are particularly experienced, and know exactly what must be done to achieve high-quality education and support. They fully understand the information provided by the headteacher on the quality of teaching and students' achievement, attendance and behaviour, and have the skills to check this first-hand. They question the information closely and use it to inform development planning and decisions, for example on teachers' pay rises, promotion or additional staffing. Members check the achievement of all students, including those known to be eligible for the pupil premium, to ensure that money is being spent wisely to improve their achievement. Many members of the management committee are the headteachers of partner schools, and contribute to discussions with personal experience of the positive impact the DESC has had on its students. They are fully aware of its strengths and the areas identified for innovation and development. The management committee ensures that the centre's statutory duties are met, including those to safeguard students wherever they are taught.

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	131100
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	403621

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

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	60
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Chair	Eileen Anderson
Headteacher	Sara Lalis
Date of previous school inspection	11 March 2008
Telephone number	01442 247476
Fax number	01442 243327
Email address	admin@dacorumesc.herts.sch.uk

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