

Unity College

150 West Wycombe Road, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP12 3AE

Inspection dates

26–28 September 2017

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Outstanding
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Leaders' improvements since the previous inspection have been extremely effective and have positively impacted on all areas of the school, including the environment.
- All aspects of the school's work are thoroughly quality assured. As a result, the school fully meets all the independent school standards.
- The new headteacher unwaveringly ensures that new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment are right for the pupils. Her stringent checks on the quality of teaching support teachers in developing their practice.
- Leaders' high expectations mean pupils develop their knowledge, skills and understanding across a range of academic, vocational and practical subjects.
- Pupils make good progress in a variety of accredited courses, including some level 1 and 2 courses. The school also prepares pupils well for their next steps.
- Pupils' behaviour and sense of well-being improves tremendously during their time at the school. Pupils are proud of their school and recognise that it has improved.
- The school is exceptionally nurturing, and works successfully with carers and parents to ensure that positive approaches are reinforced at home. Interventions to support pupils in managing their behaviour are particularly effective.
- Pupils are safe and very well looked after. Impressive work is done to ensure that pupils know about high-risk behaviours and how to protect themselves from harm.
- Remarkably positive relationships between the headteacher and directors with a governance role have strengthened the way the school is monitored and held to account.
- Although some aspects of the school are excellent, leaders agree that overall the school is not yet outstanding. Some assessment tasks are not challenging enough. In addition, approaches designed to assist pupils in attaining well in the greater range of level 1 and 2 qualifications now offered are not fully developed.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve pupils' attainment and confidence in the wider range of level 1 and 2 qualifications now offered.
- Improve teaching, learning and assessment, by:
 - ensuring that assessment tasks require pupils, especially the most able, to think deeply and apply their knowledge, skills and understanding.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- Excellent leadership from the new headteacher has led to significant and far-reaching improvements. Developments are precisely planned and impressively executed. They are firmly founded on the school's values of care, learning, and professionalism. Leaders have successfully ensured that all independent school standards are fully met.
- Leaders and directors successfully ensure that the school provides pupils, many of whom have had highly traumatic experiences, with a solid bedrock of positive experiences. The school very effectively delivers its stated aim: 'together we can build a future'. Pupils agree that their school has benefited them and provided a pathway for their future success.
- The headteacher uses her deep expertise to develop the skills of the teaching staff, providing them with excellent support and guidance through one-to-one performance meetings known as 'supervisions'. Teachers and assistants also benefit greatly from the stringent, insightful and detailed feedback provided by the headteacher, following her observations of pupils' learning. As a result, teaching is strong and improving.
- Behaviour is led and managed exceptionally well. Leaders have revamped the system of rewards and negative consequences, which is really helping pupils to manage their own behaviour better. Rewards for good behaviour link very well into each pupil's bespoke, detailed behaviour plan. As a result, the school provides a highly nurturing and positive environment for all pupils.
- The headteacher has made deep changes to the curriculum which is now extremely effective at meeting pupils' needs and also highly aspirational. In key stage 3, pupils access carefully chosen accredited courses at an appropriate level. Courses are available in a wide spectrum of subjects and topics, ranging from zoo animals to astrology. The confidence and sense of purpose pupils gain by accessing these courses enables them to progress to the next level of learning in key stage 4, including some level 2 qualifications.
- A highly effective new approach has been introduced to track pupils' progress and set targets. Teaching staff successfully use progress information to identify pupils whose progress is plateauing, and rapidly provide the assistance they need to catch up. Leaders make very good use of progress information when holding teachers to account.
- Many pupils join the school with a very negative view of society. However, staff ensure that pupils gain a much more positive view of British values, such as the rule of law, as well as a stronger personal ethical code. Work to boost pupils' capacity to make a positive contribution to their communities is carefully considered. It has many facets, such as visits from community leaders during tutor times and the chance to become a member of the school council. The vast majority of pupils leave school ready to embrace the challenges and opportunities of their next steps.
- The school is outward looking with highly transparent policies and procedures. On the very rare occasions that parents or carers complain, their complaints are thoroughly reviewed. Where necessary, external agencies are rightly involved to aid their swift resolution. There is high level of consensus between local authority commissioners,

representatives of virtual headteachers, and local authority special educational needs advisers that the school meets the needs of the pupils placed in its care incredibly well.

Governance

- Directors of the company that own the school work exceptionally well with the headteacher and leaders. Regional and national directors have remarkable expertise and experience that they bring to bear in their link roles with the school. The strong professional relationship established between the school's leaders and directors has rapidly helped to move the school forward. Directors keep a close eye on the school and frequently check its performance against a range of key indicators, including safeguarding indicators. External reports commissioned by the directors have praised the impact of the new headteacher. Directors are not complacent, and although they commend the school's incredible achievements, they astutely acknowledge that in some areas there is more work to be done.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The school has a very detailed and carefully considered policy, and accompanying guidance, which is accessible on the school's website. Leaders use this guidance to good effect and, as a consequence, their responses to safeguarding concerns are carefully thought out and exceptionally flexible. They are designed to meet each pupil's individual need and also ensure that any concerns are meticulously followed up with the most appropriate authority. Where necessary, the school tailors its provision so that pupils who are at risk, especially of child sexual exploitation or being groomed for criminal activity, receive very intensive one-to-one support, guidance and assistance. Where it is needed, the school provides this support at the pupil's home. As a result, pupils feel very safe and well cared for by the school.
- Staff training about safeguarding is extensive and a key element of weekly staff meetings. Safeguarding training links well with other training on behaviour and well-being, such as understanding the effect of attachment issues on some pupils. Staff are acutely aware that some pupils struggle to maintain a positive view of themselves. Staff are diligent, compassionate and tireless in assisting pupils in their efforts to improve their self-esteem.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teaching is strong and is improving due to the relentless focus leaders place on developing the skills and expertise of the teaching staff. It is not yet outstanding because the tasks teachers sometimes set to assess pupils' learning do not require pupils, especially the most able, to think deeply and apply their skills.
- Well-planned activities stimulate pupils' curiosity and arouse their sense of competition. Pupils are highly motivated to learn when completing challenges and puzzles.
- Teaching in mathematics enables pupils to strengthen their calculation skills so they can apply them seamlessly when solving problems. Good use is made of mathematical equipment to help pupils visualise difficult mathematical concepts.

- The texts pupils read in English are very carefully chosen and successfully introduce pupils to new ways of telling stories, for example through play scripts. They also effectively enable pupils to explore some themes that are relevant to their own lives.
- Pupils' reading and writing skills are developed steadfastly in English and in other lessons, such as science, where they are given support in learning new vocabulary and writing in a more scientific way. Pupils' work in books shows they are gaining deeper scientific knowledge, especially in biology.
- Teaching in practical and creative subjects is particularly strong. Pupils develop their knowledge, skills and understanding very well. For example, in cookery and music they really benefit from their teachers demonstrating techniques, sharing tips and giving practical advice. As a result of the successful approaches teachers adopt in practical subjects, pupils' commitment to learning is very strong. It is demonstrated by the questions they ask their teachers and each other to check that they are on the right track.
- Teaching assistants, known as tutors, play an important role in supporting pupils' learning. In most cases they do so very effectively, working closely with teachers to ensure that their support is appropriately focused. Leaders have rightly identified that assistants are sometimes less confident when employing highly specialised approaches. Leaders have thorough plans in place to rectify this.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding. Pupils are expertly supported in developing a strong sense of well-being and optimism by the well-thought-out techniques staff employ. These strategies are often excellently reinforced by parents and carers, as well as by external learning providers. Exceptional collaboration between school, home and external providers is a key factor in developing pupils' resilience and ability to manage their emotions.
- Meticulously planned interventions and bespoke therapies enable pupils who have had highly traumatic experiences to date to turn their lives around. Pupils make transformational leaps while at the school. One ex-pupil described to the inspector how the school had helped him to turn around his life and 'saved' him.
- Pupils are very well engaged in their learning and present their work neatly. Due to well-planned programmes in tutorial time, pupils can clearly see that their endeavours will help them with their next steps and are motivated by this. The atmosphere in school is calm and purposeful. Parents and carers, spoken to during the inspection, praised this aspect of the school, as well as many others.
- Pupils are brilliantly served by the very well put together careers programme. The programme provides highly accessible information about possible employment. Pupils are also furnished with thoughtfully planned experiences that will help them succeed in the world of work, such as preparing menus and organising charitable events.
- Staff successfully assist pupils in developing a greater spirit of collaboration and tolerance. As part of this, pupils have a clear understanding of how to stay safe and what constitutes bullying, as well as the impact of their body language on others. Responses to

Parent View show that 100% would recommend the school, and 100% agree or strongly agree that bullying is dealt with well and pupils are safe.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. Pupils join the school having experienced massive turbulence in their education to date and endured great personal hardship, with some veering towards criminality. As a result of the school's excellent approaches and the very impressive trust built between staff and pupils, there are momentous improvements in pupils' behaviour, attitudes and self-esteem.
- Behaviour management strategies are highly consistent and based on extensive baseline assessments conducted by experts when pupils first join the school. As a consequence, pupils generally respond very positively to teachers' instructions and guidance, including when attending sessions at external learning providers. They also respond well when staff intervene to de-escalate situations by using agreed strategies.
- The system of positive and negative consequences works exceptionally well and has been highly instrumental in improving pupils' conduct. Rewards are incentivising pupils to modify their behaviour. Appropriate and carefully devised negative consequences are applied in a very neutral way and act as an effective deterrent.
- Well-thought-out approaches to pupils' arrival at the start of the school day have improved pupils' punctuality to lessons. Attendance is measured on an individual basis because there are very few pupils currently on roll. There have been very impressive improvements in the attendance of pupils since joining the school.
- Last academic year, in order to establish agreed boundaries, the headteacher used fixed-terms exclusions judiciously and fully in line with the organisation's new exclusions policy. As a consequence, rules designed to keep pupils focused on learning are now fully adhered to. For example, pupils now willingly hand their mobile phones in to staff for the duration of the school day, including lunchtime.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Good teaching enables pupils to make strong progress and gain knowledge, skills and understanding across a wide range of subjects. The headteacher has made substantial changes to the curriculum and, as a consequence, pupils access a greater variety of more challenging courses than previously, many of which are accredited. The headteacher acknowledges that this new approach needs some fine tuning, so that pupils can attain even better in the wider range of level 1 and 2 qualifications they take.
- Pupils make strong progress in the accredited entry-level courses they undertake in both key stages 3 and 4. Pupils' success in accredited courses that are at entry level gives them the confidence and the strong foundation of knowledge they need to progress onto level 1 and some level 2 courses.
- Targeted pupils are given effective support and encouragement to help them cope with the challenges of GCSEs, as well as some other level 2 qualifications. In 2017, despite having had significant periods of time out of education prior to joining this school, a number of pupils took GCSE level examinations in English and mathematics. The majority achieved GCSE level accreditation for their learning, according to unverified results.

- The headteacher has introduced a system which carefully tracks pupils' progress towards appropriately challenging targets. Last academic year, over two thirds of pupils in key stages 3 and 4 either met or exceeded their targets in core subjects.
- Pupils make strong progress in practical subjects because they are highly motivated. For example, in music pupils play the electric guitar with enthusiasm as well as increasing expertise. In response to pupils' enthusiasm, a school band was formed last term. The band reached the level of confidence and competence to perform in front of an audience of parents and carers during an end-of-term celebration.
- The majority of pupils are disadvantaged and in the care of the local authority. Many also have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Their daily educational diet of studying stimulating topics, and receiving intensive one-to-one support as well as constant encouragement, enables them to make steady progress. During their time at school, pupils in this group improve their skills in literacy, communication, and mathematics, making strong gains from their low starting points.
- The most able generally achieve well, and some have achieved GCSE mathematics and some other level 2 qualifications. Sometimes, assessment tasks do not challenge pupils to think deeply enough, and some of the most able pupils do not make the rapid progress of which they are capable.
- Strong nurture and support enables pupils to gain new knowledge, skills and understanding as well as confidence in approaching the next stages of their education. When pupils leave to attend local further education colleges or apprenticeships they are mostly successful.

School details

Unique reference number	136373
DfE registration number	825/6043
Inspection number	10035875

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Proprietor	Keys Group
Chair	The Director of Education for the Keys Group
Headteacher	Ms Vicky Carrick-Lynch
Annual fees (day pupils)	£33,800
Telephone number	01494 446371
Website	http://www.keyschildcare.co.uk/services/education/unity-college
Email address	head.unitycollege@keyschildcare.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	3 February 2015

Information about this school

- Unity College provides full-time education for up to 24 boys and girls between 11 and 16 years of age requiring support with social, emotional and mental health issues.
- It caters for those who are accommodated in residential homes operated by the school's proprietor, and a small number of day pupils.
- All pupils have experienced significant difficulties and disruption to their education.
- The school opened and first admitted pupils in January 2011. It is run by the Keys Childcare Group under a contractual arrangement with the Thames Valley Cross-Regional Project. This is a partnership of six local authorities that places and funds the pupils at the school.

- The current headteacher has been in post since October 2016. The school is led by the headteacher, with oversight from the proprietor's director of education, assistant director of operations and director of the cross-regional project.
- Currently, six full-time pupils are on roll aged between 12 and 16 years of age. The majority are in the care of the local authority, and all pupils currently on roll have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.
- The school has an arrangement with two local organisations, Aylesbury motor project, which is part of Aylesbury College, and The Round House, to provide additional education and training opportunities.
- The school was last inspected in February 2015.
- The school aims to build pupils' self-esteem and independence by 'providing a nurturing learning environment supported by a therapeutic ethos'.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector made short visits, on five different occasions, to observe teaching and learning. On most occasions the headteacher accompanied the inspector. Tutorial time was also observed and a sample of pupils' work was scrutinised.
- Formal meetings were held with pupils on two occasions, and also once with an ex-pupil. The inspector met with two carers and made a telephone call to a third carer. A telephone call was also made to the designated officer for Buckinghamshire local authority and to a representative from Buckinghamshire's special educational needs and disabilities advisory team.
- The inspector held meetings separately with senior leaders, a group of teachers and assistants, therapists who work regularly with pupils at the school, and regional and national directors from the company that owns the school. The inspector also met separately with the commissioning officer for Buckinghamshire (one of the local authorities that places pupils at the school) and a representative from the Oxfordshire virtual school, which supports pupils in local authority care.
- A total of 13 questionnaires were submitted by members of staff and scrutinised.
- Documentation and policies, which included the school's own evaluation, development plans, records relating to safeguarding and information about pupils' progress, were checked for compliance with the independent school standards.
- The inspector took account of the eight responses to Parent View.
- Due to a parental complaint, the Department for Education commissioned Ofsted to carry out the inspection slightly earlier than planned.

Inspection team

Sarah Hubbard, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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Manchester
M1 2WD

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