

The Alternative School

The Old Library, Fernlea Avenue, Barnoldswick, Lancs, BB18 5DW

Inspection dates	17–19 June 2014	
Overall effectiveness	Good	2
Achievement of pupils	Good	2
Quality of teaching	Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Good	2
Leadership and management	Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings

This is a good school because

- Over the past three years, students' attainment levels have risen markedly. All current Year 11 students have gained places at colleges.
- Teaching is of good quality and is very well adapted to students' individual needs. This means that those who have had negative experiences elsewhere remain in education and achieve well.
- Students' attendance levels improve significantly during their time at the school.
- Students feel, and are, safe in school. They increasingly make the right choices about their behaviour.
- Most students hold very positive views of the school. They particularly appreciate the way in which it helps them to prepare for the future.
- Behaviour is good and supports students' learning well. Staff are highly skilled at deflecting potentially disruptive behaviour. This creates a positive environment in school.
- Outstanding leadership and management have led to the school's significant improvement, particularly in achievement and teaching, since the previous inspection. A crystal-clear vision and very high expectations underpin all the school's work. The school knows its strengths and areas for development well.
- Leaders constantly seek ways to ensure that the curriculum suits the students and equips them with the skills that businesses need.
- Parents and carers are full of praise for the way that the school helps their children to fulfil their potential.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- The marking of students' work does not provide them with sufficiently clear guidance about how to improve.
- The weekly reviews of students' targets are not used to best effect

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets schedule 1 of The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, as amended by The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection was carried out with one day’s notice.
- The inspectors observed seven lessons, on two different sites, taught by two teachers. They also scrutinised students’ work; some of the scrutiny was conducted jointly with the headteacher and the proprietor.
- The inspectors spoke informally with most students. They held formal discussions with eight students; four parents and carers; the proprietor; the headteacher; other school staff; and three members of the advisory board.
- The inspectors also considered a range of documentation including that related to safeguarding, school development planning, policies, schemes of work, teachers’ planning and records of students’ progress.
- There were too few responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) for these to be taken into account. The inspectors considered students’ point-in-time questionnaires, staff’s responses to the inspection questionnaire and the responses made by students, parents and carers to the school’s own questionnaires.

Inspection team

Sarah Drake, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Susan Walsh

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The Alternative School, known as TAS to all those connected with it, is a non-denominational, day school for boys and girls aged from 13 to 16 years. It was established in May 2007 to 'offer a new and exciting alternative Key Stage 4 curriculum to those young people who are not engaging with mainstream education'. It was registered as a school with the Department for Education in 2010.
- The school operates from two separate sites, 18 miles apart, in east Lancashire. Its base is on the ground floor of The Old Library in Barnoldswick; the other site is in the New Era Centre in Accrington. The school has neither teaching assistants nor middle leaders.
- There are currently 29 students on roll, with 14 girls and 15 boys. All but one of the places for students currently on roll are funded by local authorities, maintained schools or pupil referral units. Students arrive at the school at any time throughout the year.
- All students are identified as having special educational needs. Seven students have a statement of special educational needs and five are in the care of the local authority. The statements cover a range of needs, including learning difficulties, behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and conditions associated with autistic spectrum disorders.
- The vast majority of pupils are White British. All speak English as their first language.
- The school uses no off-site provision.
- The school aims to provide an alternative experience for young people who are not attending mainstream provision and would, therefore, have left school without any qualifications and with low self-esteem. Its vision is that 'with our more holistic approach of nurture, academic achievement, vocational opportunities and inclusion for all, time spent with TAS is both enjoyable and successful'.
- The school was last inspected in June 2011. A new headteacher was appointed in August 2013. During the current year she and the former headteacher, who is also the proprietor, are taking joint responsibility for the headteacher role.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise attainment levels further at the end of Year 11 by ensuring that:
 - teachers' written marking of students' work helps them to understand what they need to work on next in order to improve
 - the targets discussed at students' weekly review sessions are more precisely worded and are used more effectively to support and reflect individuals' progress.

Inspection judgements

Achievement of pupils

Good

- Over the past three years, students have gained increasing numbers of qualifications and college places. In 2012, 11 out of 17 Year 11 students transferred to post-16 colleges; in 2013, 11 out of 12 did so. This year, all 18 Year 11 students have gained college places.
- In 2013, all Year 11 students gained at least four Level 1 qualifications. In the current year, almost every student has gained at least Level 1 awards in literacy, numeracy and applied science, with almost half of the students gaining Level 2 awards in literacy and numeracy. For the first time in the school's history, a small number of students have taken GCSE examinations, including three in English and six in mathematics.
- The school's rich curriculum and consistently good quality teaching ensure that, from Year 9 upwards, students gain qualifications in a wide variety of subjects. These range from information and communication technology (ICT) to BTEC Extended certificate in sport, and BTEC in work skills and home cooking skills. Of the 160 awards gained during the current year, there are equal numbers at Level 1 and Level 2, a good improvement on 2013.
- This represents good achievement. Achievement is not yet outstanding because it has not been sustained over a number of years and not all students meet or exceed their targets. Also, very few of the students' original schools provide TAS with information about their prior attainment levels, which hampers TAS in tracking their progress from Key Stage 2. The staff check closely each student's literacy and numeracy skills when they join TAS, but this is almost always after periods of significant disruption to their schooling and can mask their true potential.
- Staff analyse each students' special educational needs very precisely, including those who have a statement of special educational needs and those who are the most able. In collaboration with the student, they then draw up an individual learning plan which is regularly reviewed and adapted. This enables each student to achieve well, including those whose needs may have behavioural, emotional and social needs but who are most able academically.
- The school is most successful in enabling students to take great strides forward in their self-esteem and personal development. This provides the key to their academic achievement and prepares them well for future education and employment.
- Students take pride in their work. They use their burgeoning mathematical, literacy and ICT skills to, for example, prepare for a job interview, develop a business plan or budget for food when it is their turn to prepare lunchtime snacks. Five students this year have gained the Duke of Edinburgh Silver Award.
- Parents are delighted with their children's achievements. One commented that, 'If he hadn't been here, I don't think he would have got any qualifications but would have been lounging at home.'

Quality of teaching

Good

- Consistently good quality teaching since the last inspection underpins students' good achievement. Key aspects of teachers' success are the good relationships that they develop with students and their very good knowledge of them as individuals. They are exceptionally patient and adept at managing students' behaviour, and also think quickly 'on their feet' when learning does not go precisely to plan.
- The teaching promotes students' literacy and numeracy skills well in discrete sessions. It also weaves the development of these skills into all learning activities; this means that students see the point of honing their skills. For example, in a land-based studies lesson, students used books and the internet to research information about plants suitable to use in a container. They also discussed the plants' different properties, leading one student to describe a daffodil as 'bright and beautiful'.
- Teachers develop activities that excite students' interest. For example, students' reading and

calculation skills, as well as their understanding of how easy it is to slip into debt, progressed rapidly in one lesson. They swiftly used randomly chosen cards, prepared by the teacher with different relevant scenarios such as topping up a mobile phone, to work their way through a budgeting exercise which required them to add and subtract accurately.

- Students know the objective of their learning activities and receive distinct tasks to complete. They understand what they are expected to do. Teachers often use questioning well to extend students' thinking and keep them on track. Students are also urged to ask questions and this encourages them to participate more actively in their learning.
- Classrooms provide a positive environment in which to learn because the displays proudly celebrate students' achievements. They also provide an overview of each individual student's targets. Teachers discuss students' more immediate targets with them at weekly review sessions, but these are not always precise enough to provide a sharp focus to concentrate on and it is not always clear whether or not they have been reached.
- Teachers provide students with helpful feedback about their work. They also encourage students to draft and review their own work as well as to evaluate that of other students. However, teachers' written marking of students' work seldom provides clear pointers for improvement.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Good

- The behaviour of students is good. Students whose behaviour was challenging elsewhere behave well at TAS. Students' attendance also improves impressively. Of the 11 students who were not attending or barely attending school prior to TAS, all are now doing so with many for more than 80% of the possible time. Both these improvements have a big impact on students' achievement.
- Students learn to believe that they have skills and capacity to form relationships with others. They also recognise that they are at the school to work, and grow in their understanding that it is they who need to make the effort in order to succeed.
- Students' attitudes to learning can vary from one day to the next, but they become increasingly aware of their own tipping point and learn to take 'time out' when necessary. There have been very few recorded incidents of poor behaviour over the past year. This is because all staff consistently apply the school's highly effective processes for managing behaviour.
- Most students agree that behaviour is good; almost all consider that incidents of bullying are extremely rare and dealt with swiftly and effectively. They understand about different types of bullying and have a good knowledge of how to avoid problems such as bullying or possible grooming when using the internet.
- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is good. The safeguarding of students has an exceptionally high priority in the school, with very well-trained and alert staff. They regularly promote the importance of students making safe choices in relation to their behaviour, including around sexual relations, drugs and alcohol.
- The curriculum provides many opportunities to promote students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Students develop their understanding of public institutions and the law. For example, they help to weed the local cenotaph before Remembrance Sunday and deepen their understanding of the emotional impact of war through study of such poems as *In Flanders Fields*. Discussions about tolerance towards those who may be different from them cover such topics as transvestism, and how the beliefs and lifestyles of those belonging to different cultures and religions are both similar and dissimilar.

Leadership and management

Outstanding

- School leaders provide an exceptionally clear strategic vision which is underpinned by precise planning, expectations, policies and routines. This means that, despite the unpredictable nature of some students' attitudes and moods, the school runs smoothly and students, all of whom have experienced many set-backs, achieve well.

- Following a major period of 'taking stock' in 2012, which led to significant staff changes, procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of the school's provision are extremely rigorous. Leaders' observations of teaching are supportive and also provide detailed suggestions for improvement. Staff have excellent opportunities to access a wide variety of further training. This means that teaching is consistently good or better.
- All staff have clearly defined roles and carry them out well. All are their own most stern critic and they constantly strive for improvement. Weekly, sharply focused staff meetings ensure clarity of purpose and consistency of approach across both sites.
- The headteacher also acts as special educational needs coordinator and the assistant headteacher has day-to-day responsibility for the Accrington site. The proprietor is in school on a very regular basis and has intimate knowledge of the quality of teaching, information on the school's performance, the use of performance management and what is being done to reward good teachers and tackle underperformance. The leaders work as a close-knit, highly professional team.
- Members of the advisory board, which has no governance role, provide useful support, such as access to the local authority's Targeted Youth Support service for those students in greatest need of counselling or other help, such as music therapy.
- All issues related to non-compliance with the independent school standards which were apparent at the previous inspection have been tackled successfully. There have also been strong improvements to students' learning and to the curriculum.
- The curriculum is based on detailed research, largely by the proprietor, aimed at ensuring that it is highly relevant to students' needs and also the needs of their potential employers. Education in work skills, sport, and students' personal and social development is very strong. The school is working closely with Edge Hill University to further improve its delivery of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) curriculum. Above all, the curriculum entices students to learn and prepares them very well for when they leave TAS.

What inspection judgements mean

School	
Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Non-association independent school inspection handbook* which is published on the Ofsted website: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140053.

School details

Unique reference number	136237
Inspection number	447243
DfE registration number	888/6113

This inspection was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, 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	Independent
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	13–16 years
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	29
Number of part time pupils	1
Proprietor	Kirsty-Anne Pugh
Headteachers	Debra Harrison and Kirsty-Anne Pugh
Date of previous school inspection	28 June 2011
Annual fees (day pupils)	£7,999
Telephone number	01282 851800
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