

Northern Counties School

Great North Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Tyne and Wear, NE2 3BB

Inspection dates 20–21 March 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	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.

- Learning and achievement are outstanding. All groups of pupils thrive to an exceptional extent, making excellent progress, as a result of the school's comprehensive and highly expert care and support for learning.
- Pupils make enormous progress in communicating, rapidly mastering methods such as signing and symbols, giving them the essential skills to learn effectively in a wide range of work and activities.
- Post-16 students make excellent progress by applying what they know and can do to real-life situations, thus preparing very well for leaving school. Students' move to college and other provision is meticulously planned and managed, ensuring transition is extremely successful.
- The teaching of all groups of pupils is very effective at promoting learning. It is highly expert at meeting pupils' needs. Assessment is thorough and lesson planning is very detailed. Pupils' work is challenging and very closely matched to their abilities.
- Pupils enjoy school and the very large majority come to school every day on time. Their behaviour is exceedingly good.
- Leaders and governors are constantly improving the school. The improvement of teaching is very effective. Teachers, support staff and therapy staff make up excellent teams who ensure pupils' achievement is outstanding.
- Leaders have embedded excellent approaches to supporting pupils' care, learning and progress. However, they have yet to compare pupils' work with that of a range of similar schools or to analyse data in order to show the proportions making different rates of progress.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited 15 lessons, observing 12 teachers.
- Meetings were held with senior leaders, staff, representatives of the governing body, representatives of the Percy Hedley Foundation and a group of nine parents.
- One inspector listened to pupils read and looked at a sample of their written and mathematics work.
- A number of school documents were scrutinised including policies and procedures for keeping pupils safe, the school’s self-evaluation, development plan and data on pupils’ progress.
- Inspectors took account of the views of 23 parents who responded to the online questionnaire (Parent View) and the 35 questionnaires completed by staff.

Inspection team

Alan Lemon, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Janice Stephenson

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is a residential special school and is part of the Percy Hedley Foundation, a charity which provides a wide range of services to disabled people and their families.
- Most pupils attend school on a daily basis and a few live at the school during the week. The school's residential provision is inspected separately. It was last inspected in October 2012 when it was judged to be outstanding.
- Currently, there are 11 local authorities in the region who send pupils to the school.
- Almost all pupils are White British. Key Stage 4 and post-16 students are grouped together for teaching and the very few children at the Early Years Foundation Stage are grouped with the youngest pupils.
- All pupils have a statement of special educational needs primarily because of hearing impairments, autism spectrum conditions or profound and multiple learning difficulties. Some pupils have combinations of these difficulties and a significant minority has challenging behaviour.
- None of the pupils are known to be eligible for the pupil premium.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Develop the practice of comparing assessments of pupils' work within school and the Percy Hedley Foundation, to include comparison exercises with a wider choice of similar schools.
- Strengthen the analysis of data on pupils' progress so that leaders are clear about the proportion of pupils who make expected progress and that which makes more than expected progress.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

is outstanding

- All groups of pupils, including post-16 students and the very few children in the Early Years Foundation Stage, make exceptional progress from their starting points. This is the result of the staff's consummate expertise in meeting their needs and facilitating very effective learning, especially in the range of key skills and knowledge pupils will need after leaving school.
- Pupils' achievement in communication is a significant strength and underpins the considerable progress made in all subjects. The ability to communicate is greatly appreciated by their parents. They know the substantial achievement this represents; it has transformed the relationship they have with their children and improved home life very considerably.
- Hearing impaired pupils and those with autism spectrum conditions communicate at a sophisticated level through signing or with symbols, for example, combining a sequence of symbols to make a simple sentence. Often by touch, eye pointing and head movements, pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties communicate their thinking clearly about likes, dislikes and their choices. The comprehensive understanding of these pupils and the excellent plans to meet their needs mean that their progress is rapid in improving physical coordination and movement, and also the great extent to which they take part in and enjoy varied activities and experiences.
- The more-able hearing-impaired pupils are fluent, sophisticated signers who engage extremely well in classroom discussions and social conversations around the table at lunchtime. The school choir performed with great confidence at a public event, singing and signing lyrics. For their GCSE English coursework post-16 hearing-impaired students role-played the aftermath of the plane crash on the island in Golding's *'Lord of the Flies'*. Through signing they worked out their characters' scripts. In their performance the students gained a deep understanding of their character's feelings and predicament, which informed their writing.
- A substantial amount of progress is made over time in writing in English. Pupils learn visually and through signing how the written word in English is set out grammatically, as distinct from what they know about the order of words in sign language. The youngest pupils and those with complex learning difficulties learn to recognise letters and to write these. Good handwriting and accurate spelling is established at an early stage and pupils' progress is rapid towards producing clearly written work in a good variety of forms such as accounts, descriptions and letters.
- Where pupils have the capacity to hear they learn to link letters and their sounds but also use signs that correspond to letter sounds in order to develop reading skills. Pupils read frequently and the excellent support they have from staff ensures they gain both a good understanding from books and the skill to tackle new and difficult words.
- At the level appropriate to each pupil's abilities they learn, very effectively, numbers and develop counting skills, making excellent progress over time. The more-able pupils and post-16 students tackle a wide range of number problems and have secured good methods for calculating and solving problems. Their mathematical knowledge and skills are sufficient for them to pursue Entry Level Certificate and GCSE courses.

The quality of teaching

is outstanding

- The school's extremely effective multidisciplinary approach gives a well-rounded and exceptional insight into each pupil. Every dimension of a pupil's needs is thoroughly assessed and the deep understanding coming from this leads to meticulous planning of learning, care and support. This applies equally to hearing-impaired pupils, those with autism spectrum conditions or profound and multiple learning difficulties.
- The school's wealth of professional knowledge is used very effectively to ensure all pupils are very well prepared for learning and that the conditions for learning every day are right for each pupil. Personal care, physical and medical needs are all very carefully fitted into planning and

coordinated so that learning proceeds very smoothly.

- The consistently high quality of learning found across the school is driven by the outstanding expertise developed through highly effective teamwork. Different therapists plan together with teachers, for example, speech and language therapists play a leading part in teaching communication skills and English. This teamwork promotes outstanding learning and systematically builds pupils' knowledge and skills. Pupils' work is very closely matched to what they know and can do and what they need to learn next and this contributes significantly to their exceptional rate of progress.
- The school has a very good number of staff giving support to pupils and each has a clear role during lessons. Their expertise in promoting learning is exceedingly well developed and they are very competent in offering individual support to pupils. In every lesson staff make a detailed record of the small steps in learning, which builds up over time into a clear picture of progress and contributes significantly to future lesson planning.
- Teaching is lively, there is a very good pace to learning and expectations are high. As a result pupils are very engaged in learning throughout the day and go home tired from their efforts.
- The excellent relationship staff and pupils have contributes greatly to the very effective management of behaviour, which is important as many pupils find it difficult to always remain settled and be cooperative.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- The very positive rapport with staff means pupils adhere very consistently to the school's high expectations for good behaviour. As communication improves so do pupils' understanding of good behaviour and their desire to behave well. Many pupils go on to actively promote good behaviour and would point it out to any pupils who they see falling below the school's expectations.
- Pupils feel safe and secure with the result that throughout the day they are mostly very calm and fully cooperative. Staff anticipate when pupils feel insecure and are very quick and skilful in taking action to remedy potential upsets. They take very effective steps to reduce the risks for pupils with the result there is little or no bullying. The few incidents, meticulously recorded, relate to behaviour some pupils are learning to control.
- Pupils thoroughly enjoy school, particularly as a result of their contact with each other and staff. Attendance rates are high and punctuality is good. The school has a policy of going out to pupils' homes and collecting those who are late. This encourages good timekeeping. They readily adopt the school's values for showing good regard, and giving respect, to each other.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- Highly effective approaches to meeting the full range of pupils' needs are firmly embedded and have developed from leaders' clear vision and ambition to be as effective as possible in promoting learning and progress in their widest sense.
- Very high expectations run through all of the school's work. The staff make a very cohesive team which is singular in its aim of, and passionate about, achieving success. The team's considerable strength comes from the exceptionally effective cooperation between the different professionals making up the staff. By sharing their assessments and planning together they ensure the best conditions for pupils to learn and make progress. As a result no aspect of pupils' needs is overlooked and there is no discrepancy between what the different groups of pupils achieve.
- Leaders are robust in their drive to improve teaching and maintain its high standard. Lessons are observed regularly and systematically. Professionals from outside the school are consulted to assure that leaders' judgements on the quality of teaching are accurate. The detailed knowledge of teaching and of the needs of the different groups of pupils gives clear direction to the professional development of the whole staff team. This leads to the exceptional level of expertise that there is in carrying out the school's work. Teachers' performance is rigorously

managed, providing each with a clear assessment of their teaching and challenging objectives tied to their progression along the pay scale.

- A very close check is kept on pupils' progress through copious collection of data. However, leaders' analysis of data is not sharply focused on calculating accurately what proportions of pupils make expected progress or more from their starting points. While teachers are accurate in assessing the level of pupils' work and take part in exercises in school and in another Percy Hedley Foundation school to strengthen assessment skills, the good practice of checking assessments with a larger number of similar schools is not fully developed.
- There is a distinct curriculum for each group of pupils providing experiences, work and activities which are challenging and very relevant to their needs. Learning opportunities for all pupils are linked together imaginatively using shared themes and achieving considerable cohesion in every pupil's work. The opportunities for communication run through all work and activities. The curriculum is greatly enriched with special events such as International Day, visits and trips abroad. Overall, there is a strong contribution made to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
- The planning of the full range of activities is highly developed and responds extremely effectively to the requirements of the hearing-impaired, autistic pupils and those with profound and multiple learning difficulties. The more-able pupils pursue accredited courses including five GCSE subjects and vocational qualifications.
- Post-16 students benefit considerably from extended preparation for leaving school, including frequent visits to college or alternative provisions. Very good opportunities for students to apply what they have learnt in school in real-life situations improve their independence.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors are robust in ensuring the school's work matches the ambitious vision and high expectations of the Percy Hedley Foundation. Governors stay closely involved and well informed through visiting school frequently, and receiving regular reports so that they are very familiar with the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes. In light of what they know about the school and of parents' views they review policy and procedures and direct changes that they decide are essential. Governors' wide experience, broad expertise and training ensure they are very well equipped for discharging their duties and keeping a close check on the school.

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	108551
Local authority	Newcastle Upon Tyne
Inspection number	400990

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Non-maintained 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	64
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	18
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Peter Wignall
Headteacher	Judith James
Date of previous school inspection	26 May 2010
Telephone number	0191 2815821
Fax number	0191 2815060
Email address	j.james@percyhedley.org.uk

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