

The Firs Lower School

Inspection report

Unique reference number	137756
Local authority	N/A
Inspection number	393402
Inspection dates	26–27 January 2012
Lead inspector	David Wynford-Jones

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

Type of school	Academy
School category	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	4–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	291
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Richard A'Court
Headteacher	Adam Campbell
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
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Age group	4-9
Inspection date(s)	26–27 January 2012
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Introduction

Inspection team

David Wynford-Jones

Additional inspector

Jacqueline Bell-Cook

Additional inspector

Gillian Smith

Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors visited an assembly and 12 lessons, observing 10 teachers. They held meetings with members of the governing body, staff and groups of pupils. Inspectors took account of the responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection, observed the school's work and looked at a wide range of documentation, including the data the school has collected on pupils' attainment and progress, procedures for keeping pupils safe and the school development plan. Inspectors analysed 130 questionnaires completed by parents and carers, together with those from staff and pupils.

Information about the school

The Firs Lower is larger than most schools of its type. Just over 90% of the pupils are of White British heritage. The remaining pupils come from a number of different minority ethnic backgrounds. Very few pupils speak English as an additional language and none is at the early stage of learning English. The proportion of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs is broadly similar to the national average. Most have either specific learning difficulties or speech, language and communication needs. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is considerably lower than the national average.

Among others awards, the school holds National Healthy School Status and Investors in People. The school was granted academy status on the 1 January 2012. The date of the predecessor school's last inspection was 15 March 2007. The current inspection is the first since academy status was obtained. The school has recently experienced staffing difficulties, including among senior leadership.

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness	3
Achievement of pupils	3
Quality of teaching	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	3
Leadership and management	3

Key findings

- This is a satisfactory school. The vast majority of pupils are happy and enjoy school. Attendance levels are consistently above average. Most parents and carers are very positive about the school. Nearly all who responded to the questionnaire would recommend it to others.
- Achievement and progress by the end of Year 4 are satisfactory, although inconsistent between classes and year groups.
- There are examples of good teaching, but it is not sufficiently consistent to ensure pupils make accelerated progress. There are insufficient opportunities to share and build on good practice in teaching. Not all teachers make effective use of assessment information to set work that meets the learning needs of pupils of different abilities. Guidance to improve their work is inconsistent.
- Effective teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make) is not securely established in the school and literacy skills are not practised enough across the curriculum.
- Staff ensure that good displays in the classrooms and around the school celebrate pupils' work and promote enjoyment of learning.
- Support for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs and those whose circumstances have made them potentially vulnerable enables them to make progress similar to that of their peers.
- Pupils' behaviour is satisfactory overall. In lessons that capture their interest they behave well. In some lessons and at lunchtimes, there is some low-level disruption. The school's behaviour-management policy is not implemented consistently by all staff.
- The headteacher is working well with the governing body to put into place systems and structures to support the school's development following the recent granting of academy status.
- Middle leaders are developing their roles satisfactorily but do not make a sufficient contribution to monitoring, evaluating and improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching to be at least good by July 2012, by:
 - refining lesson planning to ensure that work is closely matched to the needs and abilities of all groups of pupils to accelerate their progress
 - ensuring that teachers' marking regularly provides pupils with clear guidance on how to improve their work
 - updating teachers' knowledge and skills in the teaching of phonics and in developing reading and writing skills across the curriculum
 - building on and sharing existing good practice.

- Ensure that good practice in behaviour management is implemented consistently across the school.

- Refine the skills of middle leaders in monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching and its impact on pupils' progress. Take effective action to ensure improvement in teaching where it is found to be necessary and evaluate the impact of the action taken.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

Most children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills and knowledge above those expected for their age. Pupils in the current Year 2 and Year 4 are on track to reach above the expected levels in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of the year. In a Year 2 lesson, for example, pupils confidently counted forwards and backward in units of 20 between 800 and 1000 before setting off enthusiastically to find lines of symmetry in a range of two-dimensional shapes.

Pupils' progress is satisfactory overall but is inconsistent between year groups and parallel classes. This is because of variations in the quality of teaching. Pupils make marginally better progress in Key Stage 2, where teaching is generally stronger. At the end the Early Years Foundation Stage children's skills and knowledge in all areas of learning are above expectations. However, over the last four years there has been a slight decline in the children's communication, language and literacy skills. This can partly be attributed to insufficient emphasis being placed on promoting the children's knowledge and use of phonics, and developing their reading and writing skills. Similarly, attainment at the end of Year 2 has declined slightly over the same period in reading, writing and mathematics. In contrast, the school's assessment records show that attainment at the end of Year 4 has risen. Pupils in a Year 4 class worked well in pairs to discuss extracts from 'A mid-summer night's dream'. As pupils talked about the characters they developed their speaking and listening skills appropriately and were able to articulate their thinking with skills above those expected for the age.

The headteacher has undertaken a detailed analysis of the assessment information. This is being used effectively to identify individuals and groups of pupils needing extra support. Scrutiny of the data suggests that while there are minor variations in

attainment between boys and girls, and disabled pupils and those with special educational needs, there is no particular pattern over time. Ethnic heritage and economic background make no significant difference to the rate of progress that pupils make or to the standards they attain. The school is closely monitoring the attainment and progress of summer-born pupils to ensure they do as well as their peers. The gap in the performance by the end of Year 4 between these pupils and the rest is closing rapidly.

The majority of parents and carers consider that their children are making good progress. A similar proportion considers that the school helps their children develop skills in communication, reading, writing and mathematics. The inspection identified examples of good progress, but it is not consistent enough across the school to be good overall.

Quality of teaching

The majority of teaching is satisfactory. However, there are examples of good teaching on which the school can build. In nearly all lessons seen during the inspection, the learning intended and the success criteria to measure it were shared with the pupils. In most lessons, pupils made at least the expected rate of progress and developed their basic skills satisfactorily. However, pupils do not make accelerated progress in some lessons because the work is not always well matched to their needs. In these lessons, assessment information is not used well enough to plan learning to challenge pupils of differing abilities. In the occasional lesson, there is a lack of pace, teacher-talk tends to dominate and pupils are passive learners. Initial questions are not followed up to confirm or extend pupils' learning. Adult support is usually deployed appropriately to assist individual and small-group learning, but sometimes at the start and end of lessons additional help is not deployed to best effect.

In contrast, in lessons where pupils make good progress, effective use is made of assessment information to plan work that builds on previous learning, captures pupils' imagination and is well matched to their needs and ability. Teachers use questioning skills to probe the pupils' understanding and to challenge their thinking, the pace is brisk and pupils make a significant contribution to their learning.

Teachers act as positive role models to promote the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Throughout the school, the relationships between teachers, support staff and pupils are friendly. Consequently, pupils feel confident and secure. Positive relationships are a strength in the Early Years Foundation Stage and help the children settle quickly into school routines.

Teachers work in year group teams to plan the lessons and to ensure a reasonable consistency of coverage in the theme-based topics. Good displays in the classrooms and around the school celebrate pupils' work and promote enjoyment of learning. However, opportunities to consolidate pupils' literacy and numeracy skills in other lessons are often missed. In Years 1 to 4, pupils' work is marked regularly. There are some helpful next step comments. This practice enables pupils to make progress towards their literacy and numeracy targets but is not routine in all classes. The Early Years Foundation Stage team does not make full use of the outdoor area as a natural

extension of the classroom.

Nearly all parents and carers think that their children are well taught. Inspectors found that there is some good teaching in the school, but it is not consistent enough to enable all pupils to make good progress and achieve well.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

In lessons that capture their interest, pupils behave well and demonstrate a positive attitude towards learning. They are polite and courteous. They work well together and show respect for one another. However, in some lessons and around the school, for example in the hall at lunchtimes, behaviour is satisfactory rather than good. Examples of low-level disruption, rather than serious misbehaviour, were occasionally observed. Incidents of racist behaviour are rare. There have been two fixed-term exclusions for misbehaviour since the last inspection. Pupils are aware of different forms of bullying and confirm that instances are infrequent and are dealt with by the school. Pupils say they enjoy school and feel safe. They know they can turn to most members of staff for help and are confident their concerns will be addressed. The curriculum provides pupils with many opportunities to understand how they can keep themselves safe. They are able to explain clearly the issues relating to personal safety, for example traffic dangers outside the school gates, and have a good awareness of internet safety. Older pupils enjoy taking care of younger children and willingly take on responsibilities as members of the school council.

Nearly all parents and carers are convinced that their children feel safe in school. Their questionnaire responses are less emphatic to the questions on disruption to lessons and dealing with incidents of bullying. Several wrote about their concerns. Inspectors endorse parents' and carers' views that children feel safe in school, and inspection findings indicate that they generally are safe. However, parental behavioural concerns are not unreasonable. Not all staff implement the school's behaviour management policy consistently or address incidents of low-level disruption effectively.

Leadership and management

The school has the capacity for further improvement. There has been some slippage recently in the quality of teaching and the rate of pupils' progress. This can be partly attributed to the extended absence of some staff and to others leaving the school. The staffing situation has imposed exceptional demands on leaders and managers at a time when application for academy status was also being managed. Despite these challenges, leaders have ensured that attainment in Year 2 and Year 4 remains above average, pupils attend regularly and their progress is at least satisfactory. Morale is high. All members of staff are fully committed to the school and say they are determined to ensure its improvement. As a team, they have responded positively to leaders' initiatives to drive their professional development forward and have attended a series of in-service training sessions. Some sessions, for example, have successfully raised staff skills in using assessment to support pupils' learning, although practice is not fully consistent in all classes. The school development planning shows the resolution, perception and organisation to address weaknesses quickly and effectively, especially in achievement and progress. Recent changes in

curriculum leadership are vigorously supporting change. Middle leaders have enthusiasm for their role and are working well with external consultants to develop their expertise. However, this helpful initiative has not yet had time to have the impact intended to enhance middle leaders' skills to evaluate critically and support their colleagues to improve the quality and consistency of teaching and its impact on pupils' progress. The school is working closely with neighbouring schools to enhance provision and outcomes for pupils.

The governing body provides a balance of support and challenge and worked closely with the headteacher to help gain academy status. The recently appointed Chair and Vice-chair of the Governing Body have a good overview of the school's strengths and areas for development. Systems and structures have been reviewed, and roles and responsibilities are being updated. Through its close monitoring of outcomes, the governing body ensures that the school promotes equality of opportunity and achievement and that any rare incidents of discrimination are investigated. Systems and structures are in place to ensure that pupils are well cared for and the school meets statutory requirements on safeguarding. The breakfast and after-school clubs are well run and provide pupils with a calm start and finish to the school day.

The curriculum is broad, balanced and meets statutory requirements. It is enhanced by a range of extra-curricular activities, visits and visitors to the school. The curriculum supports pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development satisfactorily. Most subjects are brought together through a theme or topic approach. However, pupils' literacy and numeracy skills are not routinely reinforced in these lessons. There are relative weaknesses in the promotion of children's early literacy skills and in their knowledge and use of phonics. To help improve pupils' learning, and communication with parents and carers, the school has well-developed plans to launch a learning platform shortly.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Attendance	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



30 January 2012

Dear Pupils

Inspection of The Firs Lower School, Ampthill, MK45 2QR

Thank you for making us so welcome when we visited your school and for completing the questionnaire. We enjoyed our visit and talking to you. We were pleased to hear that you enjoy school and feel safe. Your attendance is above average. We saw that you behave well in some lessons but in others and, occasionally, at lunchtime your behaviour was not as good as it could be. This is something you can do something about by always trying to behave well. Overall, your behaviour is satisfactory.

Your school provides you with a satisfactory education. By the end of Year 4 your achievement and progress are satisfactory, although in some classes, you make better progress than in others. By the end of Year 2 and Year 4 your attainment is above the expected levels in reading, writing and mathematics.

We have asked your school to do these things to help you make better progress and reach higher standards.

- Ensure that all lessons are taught well by sharing good ideas, updating teachers' knowledge and skills in the teaching of phonics, making certain that the work planned is just right for you and that you are given clear guidance on how to improve your work.
- Improve the skills of subject leaders in checking on the quality of teaching and its impact on your progress.
- Make certain that all members of staff are as effective as the best in helping you to behave well.

Please remember that to make your school better you must play your part by always continuing to try your best.

Yours sincerely

David Wynford-Jones
Lead inspector

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