

Commonswood School

Inspection report

Unique reference number	117378
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	379406
Inspection dates	7–8 February 2012
Lead inspector	Graham Preston

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	440
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Deborah Redmond
Headteacher	Ricci Achillini
Date of previous school inspection	11 December 2008
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Age group	3–11
Inspection date(s)	7–8 February 2012
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Introduction

Inspection team

Graham Preston

Additional inspector

Isobel Randall

Additional inspector

Selby Thomas

Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. The inspection team observed 25 lessons taught by 16 teachers as well as carrying out a number of 'learning walks' to listen to pupils read, evaluate the quality of pupils' writing and observe the teaching of the sounds that letters make (phonics). Inspectors held meetings with representatives of the governing body and groups of pupils and staff. Inspectors took account of the responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection, observed the school's work, and looked at a range of documentation, including that relating to safeguarding practices, its self-evaluation and development planning. Inspectors took account of the views of parents and carers in 166 returned questionnaires.

Information about the school

Commonswood is a larger-than-average primary school that serves the eastern area of Welwyn Garden City. The school meets the current government floor standards. The majority of pupils are White British with a fifth from other ethnic heritages. A few pupils are at an early stage of English acquisition. The school has an above-average proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, and the proportion of those known to be eligible for free school meals is average. The school accommodates a separately managed pre-school and hosts an after-school club which is run by the YMCA. These are subject to separate inspection. The school has several awards including the Activemark for sport, Arts Mark Silver award and Healthy Schools status.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness	3
Achievement of pupils	3
Quality of teaching	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	2
Leadership and management	3

Key findings

- Commonswood is a satisfactory school with strengths in some areas of provision. The great majority of pupils achieve satisfactorily but weaknesses in teaching, now largely resolved, have slowed school efforts to improve further.
- An enduring strength is the positive school ethos which contributes well to pupils' personal and social development.
- The great majority of parents and carers comment positively on what many see as a welcoming school and appreciate the way their children settle quickly in the Nursery and Reception classes.
- Pupils enjoy coming to school, are engaged in their learning and behave well. Most pupils make satisfactory progress to reach the national average in English and mathematics by the time they leave the school. Standards in mathematics are rising further. However, some boys make slower progress in writing compared with their reading.
- The school has developed responsive and effective learning support for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, though a few parents and carers are concerned that, on occasion, pupils with behavioural needs distract others.
- The school has acted decisively to improve teaching through successful recruitment and professional development. There is an increasing proportion of good and outstanding practice though there remains some variation in the quality of teaching and assessment. In some lessons, learning tasks and targets are not always clear enough and there is insufficient emphasis on helping pupils improve their work.
- The headteacher knows his school well and maintains a high profile around the school. Senior and middle leaders accurately monitor and evaluate provision and demonstrate significant school improvement through well-focused action.
- The reconstituted governing body has many new representatives who are rapidly developing their understanding and becoming actively involved in school improvement.

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

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What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Accelerate pupils' progress, particularly in writing, by:
 - providing clear and achievable learning tasks and targets, shared with pupils, that enable them to make good progress in each lesson
 - ensuring that there are considerable opportunities for pupils, particularly boys, to develop their writing skills across all subjects, including a focus on improving pupils' presentation and accuracy
 - developing marking that involves pupils in assessing their own progress, provides opportunities for them to improve their work and shows them how they can progress in terms of their National Curriculum targets.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - providing development and training for representatives on the largely new governing body to help them play a more active part in monitoring, evaluating and improving the school.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

The vast majority of parents and carers believe their children are making good progress and that the school is effective in developing their children's reading, writing and numeracy skills. Inspectors found progress to be more satisfactory than good though the school is striving to improve its outcomes. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage generally make satisfactory progress and leave the Reception classes with standards that are broadly average, but lower in communication and writing. Parents and carers are particularly positive about their children's current experience in Nursery and Reception and inspectors' observations in those classes identified strengths in teaching and well-judged learning support that are helping children make faster progress this year.

In the well-taught phonics sessions seen in Years 1 and 2, pupils learnt to link letters and sounds that helped them read with greater accuracy and fluency. Current school assessments indicate the attainment of Year 2 pupils to be average in reading, writing and mathematics. Progress in Years 3 to 6 is more variable, reflecting both current and past unevenness in teaching quality. Over most year groups progress is satisfactory or better in mathematics reflecting the effective leadership of the deputy headteacher in bringing about improvements in the subject. This was particularly evident in a Year 5 class where pupils confidently demonstrated their calculation and problem-solving skills. This improved practice in mathematics is helping pupils to build on the broadly-average attainment Year 6 pupils achieved in 2011. Observations of reading in both Years 2 and 6 showed pupils making satisfactory progress with broadly-average standards so that by Year 6 pupils could read a variety of texts with fluency and understanding. However, standards in writing,

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particularly that of boys, continue to be a relative weakness in Years 3 to 6. Nonetheless, the school is accelerating pupils' progress in writing, evident in a Year 6 humanities class where pupils used the school's focus on extended writing to develop their skills.

Most pupils who speak English as an additional language are essentially bilingual and achieve at least as well as others. Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs make satisfactory progress and receive appropriate support that is managed by the middle leaders responsible for the different age groups. Recent improvements in teaching are accelerating pupils' progress and closing gaps in attainment so that, apart from in writing, there are no significant differences between any groups of pupils and the attainment of all pupils nationally.

Quality of teaching

The vast majority of parents and carers who returned the questionnaire agree that their children are well taught. Pupils similarly agree that they are well taught all or most of the time. Inspection findings are that most teaching is satisfactory and there is a significant amount of good and better teaching that is successfully accelerating pupils' progress. For example, in Nursery and Reception classes, good and frequent use of phonics programmes, help children start to read well. In one Nursery class session, teachers and support staff extended child-initiated play activities well by posing questions that helped children develop number and word recognition. Teachers and support staff mostly succeed in providing interesting and engaging lessons and maintaining positive relationships with pupils. The middle leaders in each phase have worked in teams to plan an effective curriculum including more opportunities for literacy and numeracy across the curriculum. Despite this, inspectors found variation in the consistency of good learning taking place in classrooms.

Good teaching is characterised by engaging and challenging learning activities, well matched to pupils' current capabilities with good use of teaching assistants. Teachers used the local community well to promote pupils' spiritual and cultural development evident in a visit to the local church during the inspection. Teachers develop pupils' social skills by encouraging them to work together and reflect on what they are learning. Much of this was evident in an outstanding Year 6 mathematics lesson where pupils worked collaboratively on a practical task to devise different strategies to estimate numbers of fish in a pond. This promoted independence and very effective questioning developed understanding. The school organises a considerable range of additional learning opportunities and interventions to complement classroom teaching and help all pupils make better progress, particularly disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs. Less effective teaching lacks clarity about what pupils are meant to be learning and achieving in the lesson.

Marking of pupils' work is regular and most teachers include an improvement point, although pupils' responses are usually brief and not always followed up. In a good Year 6 English lesson on connectives the teacher allowed pupils to continue to

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improve and develop their work in response to her marking of their initial efforts. However, across the school, teachers provide few opportunities for pupils to self-assess their work and there are few explicit links between marking and the National Curriculum level targets pupils are working towards.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils behave consistently well and the very great majority like being in school reflected in their improving and, for most, above-average attendance. Pupils are considerate and show understanding of a small number of pupils who need considerable support. The pupils greatly appreciate the calm working atmosphere and grasp the opportunity to participate actively in school affairs such as the school council, gardening club, various sports and the development of the school as an eco-community. This very strong sense of community was evident in an outstanding assembly on aspirations and ambitions led by the headteacher. Pupils readily responded to questions and discussed their ideas with each other. In lessons, pupils are attentive in whole class work, work well in pairs and stay on task. The vast majority of parents and carers and pupils feel that behaviour is typically good. Pupils say they feel very safe in school with little or no evidence of any type of bullying, including cyber-bullying and prejudice-based bullying related to special educational need. They appreciate the efforts staff make to deal with any worries and concerns and to ensure that there is a safe environment.

Leadership and management

The headteacher ensures there is a strong focus on a good range of learning and enrichment opportunities for all pupils. Weaknesses in some teaching during a period of staffing uncertainty resulted in a modest fall in standards but this is successfully being reversed. A greater involvement of middle leaders in school improvement has contributed to the rise in attainment. They monitor teaching rigorously and identify areas of weakness, providing programmes of professional development and mentoring to improve classroom practice. They also track the progress of individual pupils closely, including disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, and devise suitable programmes of support for any at risk of falling behind. The development of leadership across the school, steady improvements in the teaching quality, relevant curriculum development in numeracy and now literacy, have all contributed to an improving picture of pupil achievement. This demonstrates the school's satisfactory capacity for further improvement.

The curriculum, both in lessons and whole school events and activities, strongly promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. This is evident in the wide range of displays of pupils' work celebrating different cultures and religions, sports and music activities, lessons in personal, social and health education, ecological concerns and a highly popular gardening club. The wider curriculum also contributes to the development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. The deputy headteacher has been effective in improving standards in mathematics by providing opportunities for calculation and problem solving in the curriculum. More recent

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changes include opportunities for extended writing, although this aspect remains relatively underdeveloped.

Clear child protection procedures meet all safeguarding requirements and the school maintains a secure perimeter. The completely reorganised governing body has established a relevant and effective committee structure. Many representatives are comparatively new and include parent governors. They are very committed to school improvement but currently lack experience in the strategic monitoring and development of the school. The school effectively promotes equality of opportunity by carefully tracking the progress of all pupils using its middle leaders to provide well-planned additional support for particular pupils. This has ensured that pupils with disabilities and those who have special needs do as well as others and the school is now narrowing the gap between boys and girls in the quality of their writing.

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.



9 February 2012

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Commonswood School, Welwyn Garden City, AL7 4RU

Thank you for making us so welcome when we came to visit your school. Your school gives you a satisfactory and improving education, and ensures that most of you achieve satisfactorily by the time you leave.

The above-average attendance of many of you shows that you like coming to school. In lessons, we could see that most of you work together and listen carefully to the teacher. We were impressed by your generally good behaviour. It was also good to see how many of you are eager to answer questions in assemblies and lessons. The great majority of you say you feel safe in school and appreciate the help and support you receive.

The inspectors spent most of the time looking at how well you are making progress and what could be improved. Teachers do a good job of helping those of you in the lower years to understand how you can use letter sounds to improve your reading. For the school to get even better, we have asked teachers to explain more clearly what exactly they want you to know and for you to produce more work by the lesson end. We were impressed with the care your teachers take to mark your work regularly and explain what you need to do next to improve it. We have asked your teachers to give you more time to follow their suggestions and improve your work so you can better meet your reading, writing and mathematics targets. You can help by always taking care to read and follow your teachers' advice. We want teachers to give you lots of opportunities in different lessons to improve your writing. Again, you can help by showing more care in your presentation and spelling. Many of the members of the governing body are new so we want them to learn more about being a governor and be more involved in the school.

Thank you again for your help. Keep up your good attendance and work hard.

Yours sincerely

Graham Preston
Lead inspector

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