

Almond Hill Junior School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117221
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	358109
Inspection dates	4–5 November 2010
Reporting inspector	Nichola Perry

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	7–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	232
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Nicky Clarke
Headteacher	Judith Lovelock
Date of previous school inspection	28 November 2007
School address	Almonds Lane Stevenage, Hertfordshire SG1 3RP
Telephone number	01438 233660
Fax number	01438 235400
Email address	head@almondhill.herts.sch.uk

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 0300 1234 234

Textphone: 0161 618 8524

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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by three additional inspectors. Twenty lessons were observed and one assembly. Eight teachers were observed teaching. Meetings were held with the chair of governors plus three other representatives of the governing body, including the infant school headteacher, as well as the headteacher, subject leaders, the special educational needs coordinator and groups of pupils. Inspectors observed the school's work, looked at policies and documentation, and scrutinised pupils' work and 90 parental questionnaires, 23 staff questionnaires and 215 pupil questionnaires.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- How effectively do the curriculum and teaching challenge all groups of pupils to fulfil their potential?
- How accurate is the school's evaluation of its own performance, and what has been the impact of strategies to improve outcomes for all pupils?
- How effectively are the school's leaders working to develop pupils' awareness and understanding of life in the wider world, beyond that in the UK?

Information about the school

This is an average sized school which serves its local community in the Old Town area of Stevenage. Almost all its pupils transfer from the local infant school. The school is adjacent to its main feeder secondary school. Close links exist between all three schools. The majority of pupils come from White British backgrounds. The proportions of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those who are at an early stage of learning English are below average. The percentage of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is broadly average, although very few pupils have a statement of special educational needs. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is below average.

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: how good is the school?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Almond Hill is a good school. It has some outstanding features. The headteacher, ably supported by the deputy headteacher and other senior leaders, provides good leadership. She ensures that the entire school community works as an effective team which strives to improve all aspects of pupils' personal development and their learning. Behaviour is good throughout the school and much is exemplary. Attendance is above average. Relationships are outstanding. Pupils are polite, get on well with each other and are very accepting of and thoughtful towards those who are less fortunate or different from themselves. This leads to effective inclusion of pupils in all groups. Pupils demonstrate an excellent appreciation of how to keep safe and why they need a balanced diet and regular exercise. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding because it is given a high priority throughout the school. Pupils take great pride in their school and derive much pleasure from their own and others' achievements. The outstanding quality of care, guidance and support offered to pupils and their families is greatly appreciated by parents and carers, with whom the school maintains excellent links. These aspects contribute strongly to the delightful atmosphere which pervades the school and ensure that all groups of pupils are highly valued and treated with respect as individuals. The governing body is led effectively and its members are knowledgeable, challenging, and very supportive of the aims of the school.

Good teaching, some of it outstanding, encourages all groups of pupils to be positive learners who make good progress and achieve well. Attainment is above average, although initiatives to improve pupils' writing skills have only had an impact in Year 3 so far. Effective in-class support also contributes positively to pupils' good learning. Assessment is accurate and used well so that activities focus precisely on identified needs. For example, the school has rightly identified a relative weakness in pupils' ability to apply their mathematical knowledge to problem solving, although it has not yet tackled it effectively. Marking and ongoing feedback in lessons are very effective in motivating pupils to try their best and showing them how well they are doing, and pupils are increasingly involved in discussing their progress and performance with their teachers. Senior leaders use a good range of assessment data well to monitor attainment and progress and to set challenging targets for all pupils.

The good, activity-based curriculum is stimulating for all groups of pupils. For example, boys' enthusiasm for learning is particularly evident in lessons across the school. A wide range of additional activities, provided both within the school and the wider community, enhance the curriculum and also contribute strongly to pupils' excitement about learning. Pupils say how much they enjoy this style of learning.

School leaders and the governing body have an accurate picture of the school's performance because self-evaluation is thorough and accurate. Effective development

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planning ensures that improvement is focused on key priorities. Together with improvements made since the previous inspection and the entire school community's relentless determination to improve means that the school is well placed to improve further.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further raise attainment in each year group and accelerate pupils' rate of progress, particularly in writing and mathematics, by:
 - providing more opportunities for pupils to practise their writing skills in a wide range of contexts
 - devising a strategy to ensure that all groups of pupils are taught how to apply their mathematical knowledge in problem solving effectively.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

Learning was good or better in nearly all the lessons observed. Pupils enjoyed lessons and their behaviour was good. Pupils enter the school with above average attainment overall and leave with attainment which is significantly above average. Following a dip in the 2010 national assessments, attainment is rising in the current Year 6. School assessments and work in lessons and in books show that progress has accelerated and pupils are on track to achieve their challenging targets. Nevertheless, standards in writing and in mathematics have not returned to the previous levels because there has been insufficient focus on developing pupils' higher-level writing skills or on investigative and problem solving skills across the school. School leaders are working closely with the feeder infant school and have developed a joint programme of teaching and learning, for example in writing. This has proved very successful and already Year 3 pupils' writing skills have improved.

Effective assessment and focused interventions are having a positive impact on improving attainment for pupils who find academic work difficult. In all the lessons observed, effective provision and support for learning helped all groups of pupils to make good progress. Overall there are no significant differences in the outcomes for different groups of pupils.

The quality of singing is exceptional across the school. Artwork around the school is very good. The good progress pupils make in English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) and their well-developed personal skills mean that they are well prepared for the next stage of their education and later life. Pupils contribute to the community well. They identify and contribute to both national and international charities annually and the school choir regularly performs in the wider community. Pupils love acting as 'helpers' around the school and talk with pride about this. The school council provides an effective forum for pupils to air their views and the school acts on these. For example, they raised concerns about the use of bad language in the community and invited the mayor to the school to discuss this. Pupils also gained adult skills of 'democracy' when they elected a 'prime minister' for the school. Pupils speak knowledgeably about religions, faiths and cultures different from their own, especially within the United Kingdom and Europe.

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These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	2
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

How effective is the provision?

Effective teaching and in-class support leads to good achievement across all aspects of pupils' learning and development. Imaginative teaching styles and astute questioning motivate, challenge and support pupils well. In one outstanding lesson, the teacher demonstrated excellent understanding of how younger pupils learn and how adults can model good learning for pupils: creative use of the school environment brought learning alive when pupils were writing about their feelings while looking at aspects of the environment, linked to the use of descriptive and exciting language. Pupils were enthralled when the teaching assistant had to close her eyes and locate which part of the playground the teacher was describing. A good focus on subject-specific language through activity-based learning helps to develop pupils' thinking and investigative skills and raise their self-esteem.

The curriculum is strongly focused on basic skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT, which helps pupils learn effectively. However, opportunities for pupils to practise their basic skills, particularly in writing, are not yet fully developed and so pupils are not consistently producing sufficient writing of a high quality. Similarly, although the school leaders have identified an issue with pupils' retention of mathematical information, there has been limited impact of strategies used to date. A particularly good emphasis on speaking and listening, along with opportunities for engaging in learning which is relevant to their own

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experiences, contributes very strongly to pupils' good personal development. The themed approach to learning means that opportunities for developing pupils' knowledge and understanding of the world and their creative skills are now well embedded in all planning. Much use is made of the local and wider communities to enrich and extend pupils' learning.

Pupils' pastoral needs are met extremely well from the day they join the school. Very effective induction arrangements ensure pupils settle quickly and happily, and parents and carers are very pleased with this. Work with pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable, and their families, is extremely effective and well embedded into the work of the school. This enables all pupils to have equal opportunities to learn as well as they can, and ensures that parents and carers feel very well supported by the school. They are confident that the school will listen and help them access any necessary resources to help them support their children's social, emotional and learning needs. The school makes excellent use of all external professional agencies to support a wide range of pupils' needs, ensuring no group is disadvantaged.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher has created an environment where all pupils can thrive. She is dedicated to helping all pupils develop their full potential in all aspects of their social, emotional and academic development. Staff and the governing body share this vision and play their part in achieving it. Development planning consistently focuses on breaking down barriers to learning and pupils' progress is carefully tracked so that all have equal opportunities to learn and achieve.

Leadership is effectively delegated so that colleagues work well together as a team and offer good support and challenge to each other. Effective research skills have been established. This has led to the development of a good curriculum and a wide range of initiatives, including those shared with the feeder infant and secondary schools, to support and enhance pupils' learning and well-being. Rigorous monitoring of teaching ensures that nearly all teaching is good and some is outstanding. The governing body is very proactive. Governors know the school extremely well and are effectively involved in evaluating the school's performance and planning for the future. They ensure all safeguarding and child protection procedures are effective, training requirements are met and systematic records of staffing checks are maintained.

Leaders make good use of wide-reaching links within the local community to support pupils' learning and promote community cohesion. Pupils learn about diversity through

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involvement in a wide range of celebrations from other faiths, such as Eid and Diwali, as well as those within their own culture. Residential visits to France for older pupils and use of French across the school are well established, and this is helping pupils to effectively develop their awareness of the wider world.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Views of parents and carers

The proportion of parents and carers who returned a questionnaire was above average. They are highly satisfied with what the school provides for their children. The overwhelming majority of parents and carers are positive about all aspects of the school, and the individual concerns raised were taken up with the school but followed no particular pattern.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Almond Hill Junior School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 90 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 232 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	49	54	38	42	2	2	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	59	66	28	31	3	3	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	37	41	46	51	6	7	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	37	41	49	54	3	3	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	41	46	48	53	1	1	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	38	42	46	51	5	6	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	40	44	49	54	1	1	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	44	49	40	44	2	2	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	36	40	48	53	6	7	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	31	34	44	49	8	9	1	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	29	32	52	58	3	3	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	41	46	47	52	0	0	1	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	44	49	44	49	2	2	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

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	58	36	4	2
Primary schools	8	43	40	9
Secondary schools	10	35	42	13
Sixth forms	13	39	45	3
Special schools	33	42	20	4
Pupil referral units	18	40	29	12
All schools	11	42	38	9

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 March 2010 and are the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn and spring terms 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on 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 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:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

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.



8 November 2010

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Almond Hill Junior School, Stevenage, SG1 3RP

We really enjoyed watching you working and playing and talking to many of you during our recent visit to your school. Thank you very much for helping us find out about your school. We think it is a good school which is a really happy and friendly place to go to every day. We were so pleased to hear how much you all love coming to school. There are lots of good things about it:

You thoroughly enjoy school and behave really well.

You all try hard and make good progress in your work.

Your headteacher and senior teachers have very good ideas about how to improve your school.

All the adults care about you and support you extremely well. They listen to you so that you feel very safe in school.

Your school gets on really well with your parents and carers, and other people who can help you learn.

We have asked your headteacher and the other teachers to look at how they can make things even better. The most important things are to:

- make sure that you do lots more writing in all the subjects you learn at school
- teach you how to use all the good learning you do in mathematics when you are trying to solve a problem so that you get even better at it.

You can help by continuing to come to school every day, listening carefully to your teachers and enjoying all the super things that you are learning at Almond Hill.

Yours sincerely

Nichola Perry

Lead inspector

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