

Meppershall CofE VA Lower School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109620
Local Authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	356586
Inspection dates	30 September 2010–1 October 2010
Reporting inspector	Selwyn Ward

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	4–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	98
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Vincent Holmes
Headteacher	Lyn Fairweather
Date of previous school inspection	12 June 2008
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one additional inspector who was in the school for two days and a second inspector in for half a day. Inspectors visited 13 lessons and observed six teachers. They spoke with staff, representatives of the governing body, groups of pupils and parents and carers. Inspectors looked at samples of pupils' work, the analysis of the tracking of pupils' progress, school policies and procedures, school leaders' monitoring records, school development planning and risk assessments. They also analysed the questionnaires received from pupils, staff and 63 parents and carers.

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

- Any variation in the rate of pupils' learning across different key stages and between subjects, and particularly in mathematics.
- The impact of action taken by school leaders in securing improvements.

Information about the school

In this small school, the great majority of pupils are White British, with very small numbers coming from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds. None of the pupils are learning English as an additional language. A below average proportion of pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities, but numbers vary from year to year and there have been some year groups where the proportion of these pupils has been average. The school has an Activemark award and Healthy Schools status. The headteacher was appointed in September 2010. The school had previously had an interim headteacher for 18 months following the sudden death of the last headteacher.

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

This is a good school. Parents and carers are especially pleased with the friendly, caring environment and the good teaching from which their children benefit as they are taught mostly in small classes. The school caters well for its many able pupils. Throughout the school, pupils make good progress to attain high standards in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Year 2 and generally above average standards by the time the pupils move on to middle school at the end of Year 4. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities make equally good progress so that they also achieve well. They are helped in this by support staff, although teachers do not always make the best use of these additional adults during periods of whole-class teaching. At these times, usually at the start and end of lessons, teaching assistants are too often passive observers when they could, for example, be deployed by teachers to assist with assessment by keeping track of individual pupils' contribution to discussion. As some parents complain, individual education plans for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are not updated as often as they should be and they are not all sharply focused enough to be used as everyday tools to support these pupils' learning.

The children settle quickly when they start school in the Reception Year. As a result of provision that is very closely tailored to their needs, the children are working at levels that significantly exceed those expected for their ages. Standards in mathematics in Years 3 and 4 have been a little lower than those in English. The period of uncertainty over leadership of the school has delayed action to boost attainment in mathematics, but leaders have now formulated ambitious plans to further raise performance in this subject to match the often impressive standard of pupils' written work. In mathematics and in other subjects, leaders have undertaken regular monitoring of provision, including through observations of lessons. These show that staff have had practical feedback to help drive improvement, but the systems have not been in place to ensure that points identified for development are systematically followed up in subsequent observations. Teachers typically start lessons by setting out 'learning objectives' for the pupils, but these sometimes list what the pupils are meant to do rather than what they are expected to learn.

Teachers make imaginative links between different subjects and that helps to fire the enthusiasm that pupils show consistently in lessons throughout the school. Pupils listen attentively to their teachers and to each other's contributions. Even the youngest pupils work with sustained concentration, although some begin to get restless on those occasions when they are asked to sit on the carpet listening to the teachers for half an hour or more. Nevertheless, behaviour seen during the inspection was exemplary, and pupils confirm that this is the norm. As a result, pupils feel safe at school and are confident that any difficulties they might have will be promptly dealt with by staff. The pupils also have a keen awareness of the need for a healthy diet and regular exercise, as evidenced by Meppershall's Activemark award and Healthy School status. Pupils are

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especially proud of the great many opportunities they have to take responsibilities within the school and to play their part within the village community.

Arrangements for pupils' welfare are good, and many are of a high standard. The rigorous systems for discouraging avoidable absence, for example, have led to attendance rates which are outstanding. However, the governing body has not ensured that all key welfare policies have been updated when they should have been. Despite this shortcoming, governance is good because the governing body has been instrumental in otherwise successfully steering the school through a difficult period during which time pupils' good achievement has been maintained. This is certainly appreciated by parents and carers. As one wrote, 'I am proud of the school's performance, particularly in such a difficult time. The school team sets a positive example to children and parents in the continuity of the school's values and the importance of performance.' The school's success in maintaining good provision and standards in these circumstances, and its broadly accurate self-evaluation, shows its good capacity for continued improvement. This is reinforced by the positive impact that the new headteacher has already had and which is recognised by parents and carers. Several comment on their 'confidence in the new headteacher and her team'.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise standards still further, especially in mathematics, by ensuring, by the start of the summer term 2011, that:
 - the objectives set out at the start of lessons specify what pupils are expected to learn rather than the activities they are due to carry out
 - full use is made of support staff during lesson introductions and in the plenary sessions at the end of each lesson
 - pupils are not expected to sit for too long listening to the teacher.
- By January 2011, tighten management systems throughout the school to ensure that:
 - the governing body appropriately updates school policies
 - the individual education plans of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are kept up to date with sharply focused targets so that they are actively used by staff to plan work and support strategies to fully meet these pupils' needs
 - leaders' monitoring, including of lessons, is systematically followed up to show that suggested improvements have been implemented.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

Children join the school with a range of skills and capabilities, but they are generally able. Achievement is good for pupils of abilities and backgrounds. Pupils' excellent behaviour, positive attitudes and enthusiasm all contribute to the good progress that they make in lessons. Pupils are attentive when teachers introduce and explain the work of each lesson, and they mostly move to individual and collaborative activities quickly and without fuss. The pupils' impressive attendance rates also play a part in their good progress, because it

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is rare for time to be wasted recapping missed work. That they are eager to learn is evidenced by the thoughtful work that, for example, Year 3 pupils have done on their individually chosen history research topics.

This year's school councillors are new to their role, but they understand and look forward to their duties and to 'helping to make the school even better'. Pupils are keen to take on other responsibilities, for example as play leaders and as play partners, where Year 4 pupils pair with a Reception child and look out for them at play times. Music has a prominent role in the school, and the choir is regularly out in the village community taking part in events and visiting elderly local residents. Pupils also have opportunities to represent the school in other activities, including sports. Pupils take a growing interest in the wider world, both through the strong Church links and through the support of a range of local, national and international charities.

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	2
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
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	1
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

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?

Relationships throughout the school are good and staff know the pupils very well. This helps them to match work to pupils' different needs and capabilities. An improvement since the last inspection is the greater challenge extended to more able pupils. Teachers' expectations have been raised and pupils are equally keen to extend themselves. As a Year 3 boy explained, when describing why he enjoyed mathematics, 'It stretches your brain.' Each pupil's progress is carefully tracked, and the pupils say that the feedback they

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get from teachers helps them to improve their work. The work seen during the inspection showed that marking is regular, although it does not always identify, for example, misspellings of key words. Pupils benefit from regular specialist teaching, including some organised in partnership with other local schools.

The school has embarked on plans to increasingly link subjects together. This remains a work in progress, with opportunities missed, for example, to reinforce numeracy through precise measurement in science. However, there are already examples of constructive links being made in lessons. Year 2 pupils, for example, were encouraged to draw on work they had done in literacy to identify items that they could construct from jetsam if stranded on a desert island. Year 1 pupils choosing untuned percussion instruments were commended for meeting the school value of 'showing love' when they spontaneously offered to share a coveted drum.

Many of the practical arrangements for health, safety and pupils' welfare are excellent, although the school's documentation has not been kept fully up to date. Because staff know the pupils so well, those with special educational needs and/or disabilities have been helped to make the same good progress as their peers. This is no thanks, however, to the pupils' individual education plans. These have not been updated with the frequency they should and some lack precision in the targets which they set out.

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	2

How effective are leadership and management?

It is a tribute to the staff, the previous acting headteacher and governing body that the school has maintained its strong provision and standards over a difficult period. This was clearly the priority of the governing body, and its members readily acknowledge that some details slipped in the process, particularly in relation to management systems. Although policies have not been formally reviewed and updated as they should be, safeguarding arrangements are otherwise of a high standard. For example, the single central record of vetting checks on all adults in the school is extremely thorough. Staff are responsive and share the headteacher's and governing body's ambition and vision for moving this school from good to outstanding.

Equal opportunities are promoted well throughout the school. Any differences, for example, in the achievement of boys and girls, are carefully evaluated and responded to. Initiatives to encourage boys' reading have proven successful, for example, and both boys and girls achieve well. The school's contribution to community cohesion in the immediate locality is exceptional. The school forms an integral part of the village community, and it reports each month on events and activities through a regular column in the Meppershall

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Messenger. Links to broaden horizons about different communities in the United Kingdom and wider world are not quite as strong, but leaders have taken the opportunity to introduce pupils to aspects of life in the West Indies and parts of Africa. The school has plans to build on its weekly French lessons in Years 3 and 4 to set up email exchanges with a school in Calais.

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	2
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	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Early Years Foundation Stage

Children join the Reception Year with capabilities that exceed national expectations for their age, particularly in their social and communication skills. Parents and carers appreciate the way their children are helped to settle into school routines. They also praise the close liaison with the local pre-school which most of the children attend before they start in Reception. Provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage is exceptional because it challenges and extends all the children, including the many who are able and articulate, so that they make rapid progress and attain consistently high standards as they learn through play and through the carefully-crafted activities developed by the teacher, who is also the Early Years Foundation Stage leader. During the inspection, the children were enthralled by a storybook prepared by the teacher which inventively linked the village, the children and their families in the adventures of the 'Little Red Hen' whose other stories they had read together. The children greatly enjoy the activities laid on for them inside the classroom and in the stimulating outdoor area. They also enjoy exciting visits, such as to the village bakery, where they had earlier in the week helped to bake a harvest festival loaf. Staff keep a careful track of children's progress, including through termly learning journals that include photographic records and which are shared with parents and carers.

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These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The effectiveness of leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1

Views of parents and carers

A high proportion of parents and carers responded to the inspection questionnaire. The great majority express highly positive views. They especially appreciate the caring ethos of the school and most are very happy with the progress their children are making. Some parents queried whether able pupils are stretched enough. Inspectors found that there is a good level of challenge in most lessons and that able pupils are generally well catered for. Some parents of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities voiced concerns over provision for their children, pointing to shortcomings in the arrangements for updating and using individual education plans. Although these pupils make good progress, inspectors found that individual education plans are in need of improvement.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Meppershall CofE VA Lower 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 63 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 98 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	45	71	16	25	2	3	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	46	73	15	24	2	3	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	30	48	30	48	2	3	1	2
My child is making enough progress at this school	42	67	14	22	5	8	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	46	73	16	25	1	2	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	43	68	14	22	5	8	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	46	73	15	24	2	3	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)	40	63	17	27	2	3	1	2
The school meets my child's particular needs	36	57	21	33	3	5	2	3
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	32	51	19	30	6	10	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	30	48	24	38	6	10	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	32	51	28	44	2	3	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	45	71	15	24	3	5	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.



4 October 2010

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Meppershall CofE VA Lower School, Shefford, SG17 5LZ

Thank you all for being so friendly and helpful during my visit to your school. Many of you, and your parents and carers, told me how proud you are of Meppershall Lower. You are right to be. It is a good school where you make good progress and reach above average standards. The children in Acorns get off to an exceptional start. Staff look after you well. Your teachers do a good job and they are making the topics you study more interesting by increasingly linking subjects together. I was impressed by the excellent behaviour I saw in lessons and around the school. The way you get on so well together, with, for example, older children looking out for the younger ones, helps to make the school such a happy place to be. I was also very pleased to see that you so rarely miss school. Your excellent attendance contributes to the good progress you make.

Even though yours is a good school, your headteacher, staff and governing body, are all keen to make it even better. To that end, I have suggested some improvements. I would like teachers to help you to reach still higher standards, especially in mathematics which has lagged just a little behind your reading and writing. I have also asked the school to tighten some procedures and ensure that school policies are kept up to date. For those of you who need extra help with your learning, I have asked the school to similarly ensure that the plans that set out how to help you are updated regularly.

You can help to move your school from good to outstanding by continuing to work hard and do your best.

Yours sincerely

Selwyn Ward

Lead inspector

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