

Stephenson Lower School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109502
Local Authority	Bedford Borough
Inspection number	377932
Inspection dates	8–9 November 2011
Reporting inspector	Judith Matharu HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The registered childcare provision, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Type of school	Primary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	406
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Paul Davies
Headteacher	Alison Bray
Date of previous school inspection	21 May 2009
School address	Canvin Way Bedford MK42 0HL
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Registered childcare provision	Stephenson Pre-School
Number of children on roll in the registered childcare provision	48
Date of last inspection of registered childcare provision	22–23 May 2009

Age group	3-9
Inspection date(s)	8–9 November 2011
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. They observed 28 lessons taught by 18 teachers, including seven lessons observed jointly with the headteacher. Meetings were held with groups of pupils, members of the governing body and staff, and several informal discussions were held with parents and carers. Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at a range of documentation, including information about pupils' progress, the improvement plan, attendance information, school policies, and health and safety information. Inspectors analysed 90 questionnaires completed by parents and carers, together with questionnaires from Key Stage 2 pupils and staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- The current levels of attainment and rates of progress for all pupils.
- The quality of teaching across the school and whether this is good enough to improve progress.
- The impact of leaders at all levels on raising attainment and accelerating progress for all pupils.

Information about the school

This first school is larger than average. The school population is very diverse; over half of the pupils are from a wide variety of minority ethnic backgrounds, including a significant number of Bangladeshi heritage. Just under half of the pupils are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is high. The proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above the national average, although the proportion that has a statement of special educational needs is just below the national figure. The school makes provision for four pupils with hearing impairment, with support from the local authority. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is over 37%, which is very high.

The school provides for pupils in the Early Years Foundation Stage through its Pre-School, and Nursery and Reception classes. The Pre-School is open during term time and takes a maximum of 24 children at any one time.

The school has National Healthy Schools status. There have been some significant changes since the last inspection. The previous headteacher left at the end of the summer term in 2011. The current headteacher is new in post from September this year. There have also been significant changes to the leadership of the governing body; the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body took up their posts in September 2011.

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?

4

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

4

Main findings

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement.

The school has not made sufficient progress since it was last inspected and does not currently have the capacity to move forward. It is a welcoming school where pupils are happy, well behaved and eager to please, but attainment is too low. Although pupils get off to a reasonable start in the Early Years Foundation Stage and make satisfactory progress here, attainment in reading, writing and mathematics, particularly at Key Stage 1, is low and the gaps with national performance are widening. Progress for a significant number of pupils, including those who are potentially vulnerable and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, is inadequate.

There are a number of contributory factors. Insufficient attention has been paid to clarifying what is expected of senior leaders in driving whole-school improvement. Senior leaders and the governing body have not established a culture of monitoring and evaluating the school's work. Consequently, their evaluation of its performance is too generous. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to monitoring and evaluating teaching across the school with the result that this is stuck at a satisfactory level overall. Teachers do not receive appropriate guidance about the features of good or better teaching and are not provided with suitable support or challenge to improve their practice. Consequently, there is not enough consistently good teaching to raise pupils' achievement significantly. Some lessons are too teacher-directed, lack pace or consistent challenge for all pupils and the expectations of what pupils might achieve are too low. Opportunities are missed to reinforce language and communication skills. Further, the commitment of all teachers to a systematic phonics (the sounds that letters make) programme in order to develop and secure the reading skills of every child is not yet embedded across the school. Pockets of good practice were observed by inspectors.

The use of assessment across the school by teachers and leaders to inform planning, provide guidance for pupils on the next steps in learning, track progress and identify underachievement is not routine or systematic.

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At present, the curriculum is not well matched to pupils' needs and provides too few challenging and interesting experiences. In particular, opportunities for pupils to develop and apply their reading and writing skills in different subjects are under-developed. Subject leaders have made little impact on raising achievement. A lack of clarity about the focus of leadership roles and responsibilities in the senior team is hindering the introduction of robust improvement activities. Importantly, the shared leadership and management of provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities creates uncertainties, limits a cohesive approach and poses difficulties in terms of the training, deployment and management of a very large team of teaching assistants. The outcomes of the intervention activities for pupils with a variety of additional needs are weak, and these pupils make inadequate progress, yet the impact of these interventions is not routinely monitored or evaluated.

The newly appointed, experienced headteacher has made a very positive start. She has quickly gained a good grasp of the issues facing the school and expresses a clear and convincing view of the actions needed to drive improvement. In a short space of time, morale across the staff team has improved significantly – many teachers commented on an improved team ethos, the clarity of the headteacher's vision and their desire to work with her to bring about improvements.

The school is well resourced and provides a safe and friendly environment for pupils. Pupils demonstrate good understanding of right and wrong. They are respectful and enjoy good relationships with each other and adults in school.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise attainment and increase pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics through:
 - ensuring that all children and pupils practise their reading and writing skills every day through a consistent, coherent whole-school approach to developing basic skills across the curriculum
 - ensuring that assessment information is used in class to plan activities which provide a suitable level of challenge for all groups of pupils
 - ensuring that assessment information is used at a senior level to closely track and monitor pupils' progress, identify underachievement and implement suitable interventions.

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better by ensuring that all teachers:
 - have high expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - are clear about the learning outcomes they are seeking and select appropriate activities to achieve these
 - constantly promote and reinforce language through encouraging high-quality dialogue with and between pupils

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- use a range of techniques to fully engage the pupils and ensure they are active participants in their learning
 - when marking pupils' work, make clear how it can be improved
 - are encouraged to consider best practice elsewhere.
- Improve leadership and management across the school by:
- clarifying the roles and responsibilities of senior leaders with regard to school improvement; in particular, rationalising and clarifying the leadership and management of provision and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - ensuring that the systems for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school are sufficiently rigorous and lead to accelerated rates of progress
 - giving due attention to robust monitoring and evaluation of teaching; and providing guidance on improving this to a consistently good or better level
 - developing the role of subject leaders so they are better able to contribute to self-evaluation and improvements to the curriculum
 - ensuring that the governing body rigorously holds the school to account.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**4**

Children enter the school with skills that are well below those expected for their age. In particular, their language, communication and social skills are considerably less well developed than those of most children. At the start of Year 1, their skills and knowledge remain low. At Key Stage 1, achievement is inadequate. Despite some good teaching, insufficient progress is made overall in securing pupils' reading, writing and number skills throughout the key stage. Lesson observations and pupils' work show that expectations of pupils are variable and practice is inconsistent. The teaching of reading and writing skills on a daily basis varies from class to class with little evidence in some pupils' books that they are making progress. The pace of learning slows when teachers revise previous learning for too long and do not challenge pupils by pressing on with new work. Consequently, pupils enter Key Stage 2 with attainment that is significantly lower than the national average.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are not making sufficient progress, despite the generous level of support available in the school. The attainment of these pupils and those from other potentially vulnerable groups is low. Although inspectors observed some effective interventions with individuals and groups of pupils where teaching assistants worked confidently and successfully in partnership with the class teacher to correct misconceptions and provide good guidance, too often the quality of the input is at a basic level.

At Key Stage 2, the school's tracking data suggest that progress improves slightly, although lesson observations indicate this varies from class to class. Again, expectations of pupils' work are too variable; whole-school approaches to the development of literacy and numeracy skills lack rigour and consistency. In particular, this limits progress for those pupils who are learning English as an

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additional language. When teachers pose suitable levels of challenge, pupils work with purpose and much enthusiasm.

Pupils are positive about school life and behave well. Through concerted efforts to promote good attendance, including attendance awards, this has improved to an average level. Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe and have confidence in adults to sort out any problems. They enjoy taking responsibilities in school when invited to do so, although the opportunities for these are not extensive. Pupils who are members of the school council are active and enthusiastic about their work and enjoy their fund-raising activities. The school is a cohesive community and pupils demonstrate a sound understanding of other cultures. There is scope to extend pupils’ understanding of life beyond their immediate community through fostering links beyond the school.

These are the grades for pupils’ outcomes

Pupils’ achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	4
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attainment ¹	4
The quality of pupils’ learning and their progress	4
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	4
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils’ behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	3
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	4
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attendance ¹	3
The extent of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3

How effective is the provision?

When teaching is good, the pace of learning is rapid. Pupils are provided with purposeful opportunities to talk and extend their vocabulary with effective prompting from teachers and reinforcement by visual aids or other multi-sensory approaches. In an effective lesson in Year 4, pupils worked with interest, showing good skills in manipulating their electronic presentations on ancient Egypt. The class teacher recapped prior learning swiftly and moved on quickly, modelling good practice effectively, encouraging pupils to explore and develop their skills in information and

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

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communication technology with confidence.

However, there is insufficient good teaching to accelerate pupils’ learning and progress. Teachers generally take too much time to introduce learning and pupils are passive for too long. Pupils are not given sufficient opportunities to respond and talk, thus restricting opportunities to apply and extend their basic skills, which would help them to progress more quickly. Learning activities do not build quickly enough on what pupils already know and can do. Occasionally, the tasks are acceptable but uninspiring; opportunities to use interactive methods, for example interactive technology, are missed. Teachers’ use of the information gained from pupils’ responses in lessons to adjust both their immediate teaching and their longer-term planning is too variable. Much marking of pupils’ work is unhelpful in its detail and advice to pupils on how to improve.

The curriculum is not promoting achievement as it does not meet the needs of pupils. There are too few opportunities across the curriculum to develop the key skills of literacy and numeracy. Pupils enjoy a variety of trips out of school and activities such as film club but, overall, the extent of extra-curricular enrichment is limited.

Some aspects of care, guidance and support are good. For example, the work of the learning mentor is particularly effective in liaising with parents and carers and external agencies to support individual pupils. Transition arrangements are secure. However, there is little extended provision or involvement of parents and carers in supporting their children’s learning.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	4
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils’ needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	4
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	3

How effective are leadership and management?

The newly appointed headteacher has gained an accurate understanding of the work of the school and is determined to bring about improvement. She has the full support of the governing body. The majority of the staff are responding well to the challenges posed, and positive relationships are being built with parents and carers. There has been insufficient time since the arrival of the headteacher to evaluate the impact on pupils’ attainment or progress. Improvement plans are at an embryonic stage. There remain significant issues to address to build the necessary capacity around the headteacher in order to move the school forward swiftly. Leadership roles and responsibilities are not clear. Senior staff are not yet allocated key

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responsibilities for improvement that make lines of accountability clear. The roles of subject leaders are under-developed, which limits their contribution to curriculum development and their influence in raising achievement.

The governing body has been revised and key members of this group, including the newly formed strategic group, understand the issues facing the school. However, over time, the impact and effectiveness of the governing body are inadequate. The school tackles and follows up well any day-to-day issues of bullying or discrimination. However, the promotion of equal opportunities is inadequate because the gap between pupils’ attainment in the school and pupils nationally is not closing, and for many groups, including potentially vulnerable pupils, is increasing.

Pupils’ safety and well-being are given due attention; safeguarding arrangements have been reviewed and revised recently and are satisfactory. Staff training is up to date and welfare arrangements for individual children are good.

Parents and carers are positive about the work of the school, although opportunities for them to influence developments in the school or directly support their children’s learning are limited. Pupils are part of a cohesive school community; the school’s work to promote their understanding of diversity and different communities is satisfactory.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	4
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	4
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	4
The effectiveness of the school’s engagement with parents and carers	3
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	4
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	4
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	3
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	4

Early Years Foundation Stage

Those children who attend the Pre-School settle well and are quickly engaged happily in purposeful activities. Induction procedures are clear and a variety of suitable play activities stimulates children’s interest and helps them to develop positive attitudes to

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learning. Staff work well together; provision here is good with assessment information used well to record progress and plan the next steps in learning.

As the children move through the Nursery and Reception classes, although they grow in confidence and familiarity with school routines, their skills, particularly in language and communication, remain below those expected for their age. Overall, children make satisfactory progress. The Early Years Foundation Stage presents a welcoming, secure learning area for children who enjoy learning and want to succeed. The children willingly make choices and mostly behave well. Leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage are satisfactory.

Adults employ a satisfactory range of teaching methods, using a variety of interesting and appropriate equipment and resources to stimulate children’s imagination. In a good session observed, the teacher repeatedly reinforced her comments and questions through symbols and other visual means. The quality of her comments prompted good independence in children who successfully sequenced a story, demonstrating good understanding of the task. One child was encouraged to make circles out of play dough to illustrate the shapes referred to in their story and was delighted with her efforts and enthusiastically explained what she was doing.

However, at times teaching is less successful. There are occasions when directed activities are led by adults who talk for too long. Opportunities for purposeful dialogue between adults and children to develop communication skills are under-developed. Sometimes, the play activities are not linked closely enough to aspects of learning that many children are struggling to grasp. For example, in a play session observed in the outdoor area, children were negotiating obstacles. Although this encouraged balance and coordination, it was insufficiently linked to a relevant story, and did not encourage children to talk about the experience, learn new vocabulary or extend their language skills.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	3
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	3
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	3
The effectiveness of leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage	3

Views of parents and carers

Of those parents and carers who replied to the questionnaire, almost all, including those who spoke with inspectors, are happy with the school’s work. Several parents and carers commented on the positive atmosphere evident in school, stating how much their children enjoyed attending. The inspection endorsed the welcoming atmosphere in school for pupils. A few parents and carers felt their children were

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making insufficient progress; inspectors endorsed their concerns and judged that rates of progress are inadequate. Several parents and carers would like more information about the school, greater communication and some improvements made to the school website. Inspectors agree that more could be done and have asked the school to address these matters.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Stephenson 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 90 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 406 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	56	62	33	37	1	1	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	58	64	31	34	1	1	0	0
The school informs me about my child’s progress	45	50	37	41	7	8	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	43	48	40	44	7	8	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	48	53	36	40	1	1	0	0
The school helps me to support my child’s learning	41	46	46	51	3	3	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	36	40	51	57	2	2	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)	38	42	41	46	3	3	2	2
The school meets my child’s particular needs	35	39	51	57	4	4	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	37	41	44	49	3	3	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	31	34	50	56	4	4	1	1
The school is led and managed effectively	39	43	48	53	2	2	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child’s experience at this school	47	52	40	44	1	1	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	43	47	10	0
Primary schools	6	46	42	6
Secondary schools	14	36	41	9
Sixth forms	15	42	41	3
Special schools	30	48	19	3
Pupil referral units	14	50	31	5
All schools	10	44	39	6

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 2010 to 08 April 2011 and 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.

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

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

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.



10 November 2011

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Stephenson Lower School, Bedford, MK42 0HL

Thank you for your friendly welcome when we visited your school recently. We enjoyed visiting your lessons, talking with you and looking at your work. Your school does some things well, but there are a number of things that need improving. For this reason, we have decided that your school requires 'special measures'. This means that your school needs extra help to improve. Inspectors will visit regularly to check how well it is improving.

Some things are going well.

- Your behaviour in lessons and around school is good. You are kind to each other, get on well together and most of you try hard to do your best in lessons.
- The adults in school care about you and make sure you stay safe. You told us you are happy in school and know how to stay safe. It is clear that you know who to go to if you need help.
- We were impressed by how much you know about staying healthy, especially the importance of healthy eating.

We have asked the staff and governors to help you make better progress in reading, writing and mathematics. We want them to make sure that lessons really encourage you to learn new things more quickly and ensure that the activities are interesting and fun. We would like you to have much more regular practice every day in your reading, writing and number skills so that you can get better in these. We would also like you to have clear comments in your books about how your work might be improved. Some teachers encourage lots of talking with your talk partners in lessons and we hope to see more of this.

We wish you well and look forward to hearing how you are doing in future.

Yours sincerely

Judith Matharu
Her Majesty's Inspector

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