

Stephenson Lower School

Canvin Way, Bedford, MK42 0HL

Inspection dates

12–13 March 2013

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|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|----------|
| Overall effectiveness | Previous inspection: | Inadequate | 4 |
| | This inspection: | Good | 2 |
| Achievement of pupils | | Good | 2 |
| Quality of teaching | | Good | 2 |
| Behaviour and safety of pupils | | Good | 2 |
| Leadership and management | | Outstanding | 1 |

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Teaching is good. Skilled teachers have a sharp focus on developing reading, writing and number skill through an exciting and engaging set of experiences.
- Teachers and leaders have overcome significant inadequacies since the last inspection.
- The headteacher, ably supported by a highly effective leadership team and governing body, is relentless in her drive for excellence.
- Children enjoy being at school. They feel safe and work hard to please their teachers.
- Pupils are catching up following previous underachievement. Pupils are on track to reach levels of attainment that are near to the national average.
- The school is successfully closing gaps in attainment between different groups of pupils.
- The school is good at recognising when pupils need some extra help and quickly provide this support in class and in small-group sessions.
- Pupils love to read and teachers match books to the exciting activities in class so pupils can read more about topics that interest them.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Some small-group work with a teaching assistant is held in parts of the school that are very noisy and, where this is the case, pupils do not benefit as much from these sessions.
- There remains some significant underachievement from where pupils have fallen behind in the past. This is most noticeable in Reception and Year 1.
- Adults working with nursery-aged children do not always identify opportunities to develop language and communication skills. This means that too many pupils leave Nursery with skills below those expected for their age.
- Many of the schools' systems and strategies are new and will need to be tweaked over time to make sure they lead to outstanding achievement.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors spent most of their time observing learning in classrooms and around school.
- Learning was observed for sustained periods (over 20 minutes) in 16 lessons. Many small-group sessions were also observed.
- Inspectors observed the school's work. They considered information about pupils' attainment and progress, information about school improvement, documentation relating to pupils' safety and safeguarding, notes from the governing body and work in pupils' books.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher, other leaders, teachers, governors and a representative from the local authority.
- Pupils read to inspectors and talked about their work.
- Inspectors talked informally to groups of pupils around the school and in some lessons about their attitudes towards school.
- Inspectors talked to parents and carers at the end of the school day and took account of the views expressed by parents in the school's survey of views.
- The lead inspector took account of the findings from his previous monitoring visits.

Inspection team

Michael Sheridan, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Fatiha Maitland

Additional Inspector

Full report

In accordance with section 13 (4) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures.

Information about this school

- This is a much larger-than-average lower school. Children start in the Nursery or pre-school and leave at the end of Year 4.
- The proportion of pupils for whom the school received additional government funding known as the pupil premium, because they are known to be eligible for free school meals, is much higher than the national average.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is above the national average.
- The proportion of pupils supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is in line with the national average.
- The school houses specially resourced provision for pupils with special educational needs in the form of a specialist unit for four pupils with a hearing impairment.
- The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is well above the national average. The largest group is White British with the next biggest group being Bangladeshi.
- The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is above the national average. The school has an increasing numbers of pupils who have emigrated from countries in Eastern Europe and many of these children are at a very early stage of speaking English, particularly in Key Stage 1.
- At the last full inspection the school was placed in the category of special measures. This inspection took place during the third monitoring visit.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Develop a structured programme for improving children's communication, language and literacy skills in Nursery and pre-school by:
 - identifying children's individual skills so that activities can be planned at the right level to encourage them to talk, write and read
 - making sure all adults are aware of individual children's needs and include in planning opportunities for all children, including those who do not start conversations with adults, to talk and develop their vocabulary
 - being ambitious in encouraging children to talk about books and begin to read simple words
 - developing a culture where the expectation is that pupils leave Nursery near to age-related expectations, particularly in communication, language and literacy.
- Make sure that all small-group sessions have appropriate, quiet and comfortable accommodation so pupils can concentrate fully and adults can focus on delivering high quality support and intervention.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Pupils are making much better progress than in the past. Gaps are closing so pupils are likely to leave the school this year with standards of attainment near to national expectations. This is considerably higher than in the past.
- Progress is accelerating throughout the school. There are some year groups, most notably Year 1 and Reception, where pupils are working at a lower level than that expected for their age. Work in pupils' books shows that these pupils are making rapid progress and teachers are focusing on the right areas to help them catch up further.
- Pupils settle quickly into Nursery and pre-school and enjoy the range of activities on offer. They learn to play together and develop an understanding of being part of a larger group.
- There are missed opportunities to develop children's language in Nursery and pre-school. Not enough is done to encourage all children to improve their talk, early writing and reading. Adults tend to work with one or two children and some children drift between activities or have favourite activities where communication is not encouraged.
- The pupil premium is being used well to ensure the gaps in achievement between pupils are closing. The funding is being spent on additional group work and training for staff, and to help all pupils be included in all activities. This is particularly impressive because it is happening as attainment overall is rising. Progress for underachieving groups is rapid because they receive good quality support in class and in small groups.
- Last year, pupils on free school meals left Year 2 about two points behind their peers (each point represents expected progress in a term). This year the gap is closing and the gap between free school meals and their peers is less than one point overall. The gap in reading has almost disappeared.
- There are many interventions taking place and, while all interventions are making a difference, some are less effective because they take place in noisy parts of the school, like in the school hall.
- Pupils are reading all the time. They enjoy books and read with increasing fluency. Pupils learn the sounds that letters make and use these skills to work out how to read and spell unfamiliar words.
- Pupils who speak English as an additional language make rapid progress because they have plenty of opportunities to talk. Bi-lingual teaching assistants communicate effectively with parents so they stay informed about their children's progress. Pupils are encouraged to speak in English quickly and their home language is only usually used to reassure pupils who are very new.
- Pupils with a hearing impairment take part in lessons effectively and make similar progress to their peers. Communicators (adults who use sign language) work well to make sure these children understand what their teacher is saying.

The quality of teaching is good

- Pupils enjoy their lessons. The school has developed an interesting curriculum that captures pupils' imagination. Special visitors - such as a local chef, visits to castles and elaborate scenarios such as 'dragon eggs' found on the playing field - all add to the excitement of learning.
- Teachers spend a lot of time creating an environment that fits the theme being studied. This is done so well that you feel like you are entering a different world in each set of classrooms. Interesting theme books are prominently positioned and pupils can often be seen choosing to read one of these simply for the pleasure of reading.
- Teachers are absolutely focused on developing the essential skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening and mathematical problem solving. Pupils are expected to work hard and they willingly do so. Pupils are proud of their work and enjoy showing off their books.
- Teachers' subject knowledge has improved considerably. Phonics is taught accurately and at the right level for different pupils. Teachers know their pupils well and plan their next steps effectively.
- Marking is used well to give pupils feedback on their work. Pupils respond to this and make improvements to their work.
- Additional support is very well planned for pupils who need extra help. This extra help is in classes and in small-group sessions. Teachers and teaching assistants work well together and regularly discuss the emerging needs of pupils. The special educational needs coordinator (the senior leader with responsibility for organising extra support) carefully monitors the progress of different groups and individuals. Because of this, she is able to provide additional guidance to teachers and teaching assistants about ways to help pupils catch up.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- There is a positive, purposeful buzz around the school. Pupils behave well because they want to be in their lessons.
- The relationship between adults and pupils is good. Staff at lunch time talk to pupils respectfully. They work hard to engage pupils in activities, including sport and sharing books so behaviour remains positive during unstructured times.
- Attendance has improved considerably and this is now in line with the national average. This is because pupils want to be at school and because the school has been increasingly successful at working with the families of pupils who are persistently absent. Senior leaders and governors are determined to tackle the remaining poor attendance. They are quick to point out the correlation they see in the school's performance information between poor attendance and weaker progress.
- Pupils behave well in lessons because they want to be there. They enjoy what they are doing and know that adults will help them when they get stuck. Pupils learn to get on well together. Pupils in older classes effectively work well on projects, sharing ideas and learning from each other.
- Pupils say they feel safe and know that adults will help them if they need it. Pupils learn about staying safe in different situations. They say that bullying is rare and teachers deal with issues

quickly. They know that discrimination of any kind is not tolerated.

- Parents who spoke to inspectors said that they have faith in the school to sort out issues. Some stated that the school leaders are very approachable and these parents felt that teachers and leaders listen to them and respect their views.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- Leaders are relentless in their pursuit of excellence. They have driven the transformation of this school. Their efforts and their steadfastness in the face of difficulties have been instrumental in creating the cohesive, forward-looking staff body that now exists.
- Leaders are clear about what they intend to achieve and they communicate this well. Teachers and teaching assistants work hard to make this vision a reality. The sharp focus on basic skills taught through interesting topics is paying off.
- Leaders know their school very well. The headteacher has built a team with the right skills to do what needs to be done. Leaders are highly evaluative and self-critical. They want the best for every child and their actions and plans are focused on achieving this. This ensures that every child has equal opportunities to succeed.
- Leaders manage performance well. The systems are new but have been used to ensure all adults are clear about how they contribute to the school's improvement. The improvements in teaching and learning are testimony to the tenacity of the headteacher in making the necessary changes and improvements.
- Leaders are constantly looking for ways to improve further. They take advice willingly and act on it decisively and intelligently. They seek the views of experts and look for outstanding practise in other schools to see what else they can learn.
- The pupil premium is being used very well. Leaders and governors can show how this funding is being used to make a difference to groups of pupils and, in some cases, individuals.
- The local authority has provided the school with advice about the curriculum and improving provision in Reception classes. Further support has been provided through a coach who has worked with the leaders in identifying reasons for underachievement and setting targets. This advice had limited impact because no notes of visits were provided to show leaders what needs to happen and the attainment targets set were much too low and provided little challenge.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body is highly professional in carrying out its duties. Governors, particularly on the standards committee, make a significant contribution to the outstanding leadership in school. They know the school well, the quality of its teaching and the achievement of pupils, and challenge leaders to improve further. They have developed appropriate systems to ensure all their duties are covered and continually look to see how they could do things better. Individual governors bring their skills from their own professional lives to the school and use these very well to support school improvement. They show an incredible level of commitment and a burning desire to improve the life chances of pupils in their school. They use targets to improve teaching well to challenge leaders further and they have taken steps to make sure the performance management systems in school are fit for purpose and hold teachers to account. They know what the school is doing to reward good teaching and to tackle any underperformance. Governors have a secure understanding of the finances of the school. They

make well-thought-through decisions with financial prudence.

What inspection judgements mean

| School | | |
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| Grade | Judgement | Description |
| Grade 1 | Outstanding | An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment. |
| Grade 2 | Good | A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment. |
| Grade 3 | Requires improvement | A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection. |
| Grade 4 | Inadequate | <p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> |

School details

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| Unique reference number | 109502 |
| Local authority | Bedford Borough |
| Inspection number | 410251 |

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

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| Type of school | First |
| School category | Community |
| Age range of pupils | 3–9 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 501 |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body |
| Chair | Paul Davies |
| Headteacher | Alison Bray |
| Date of previous school inspection | 08 November 2011 |
| Telephone number | 01234 261683 |
| Fax number | 01234 213572 |
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