

The Firs Lower School

Station Road, Ampthill, Bedford, MK45 2QR

Inspection dates 7–8 November 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Standards are consistently above average by the end of Year 2.
- A new programme for the teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make) is having a positive impact on pupils' reading and spelling.
- Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs achieve well because support is tailored carefully to meet their needs.
- Teaching has improved since the previous inspection and is now good.
- Pupils have excellent attitudes to learning. Their behaviour is outstanding and they say they feel safe, a sentiment supported by all parents and carers who responded to Parent View.
- Leaders, managers and governors have worked well with staff to drive improvement in teaching and to raise pupils' achievement.
- The school has developed its subject leaders well and makes sure they play a full role in assessing how well it is doing.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Pupils are sometimes set work that is too easy for them.
- Pupils do not have enough opportunities to write at length in different subjects.
- The range of reading material that is available for more-able pupils is somewhat narrow.

Information about this inspection

- The inspectors observed 24 lessons or parts of lessons, some of which were seen jointly with the headteacher or deputy headteacher.
- The inspectors heard pupils read and, together with senior leaders, looked closely at examples of pupils' work.
- The inspection team looked at a wide range of school documents, including development plans, policies, self-evaluation reports, monitoring files, safeguarding and curriculum materials, evidence of the school's partnership work and information for families.
- The inspectors met with pupils chosen at random. Discussions were held with the headteacher and deputy headteacher, senior leaders, subject leaders, the pastoral care lead practitioner, the Chair of the Governing Body and three other governors, and a representative from the local authority.
- The inspection team took account of the 78 responses to the online questionnaire Parent View. They also spoke with parents and carers and considered a letter.
- The inspectors examined 35 staff questionnaires.

Inspection team

Nick Butt, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Gary Anderson

Additional Inspector

Vreta Bagilhole

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is larger than the average-sized primary school.
- There are two classes in each year group.
- The school had already converted to an academy when it was last inspected.
- Most pupils are from White British backgrounds.
- The proportion of pupils supported by the pupil premium (additional funding for certain groups such as pupils known to be eligible for free school meals or looked after by the local authority) is below average.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is below average. The proportion supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is also below average.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Move teaching from good to outstanding by:
 - making sure that the work is sufficiently demanding for all pupils
 - giving pupils more opportunities to write at length in subjects other than English
 - providing a wider range of reading material for more-able readers.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Across the school, pupils achieve well so that standards are consistently above average by the end of Year 2 and attainment is above expectations by the end of Year 4. This is because teaching has improved and is now good. In the national assessments in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Year 2, pupils are typically around six months ahead of pupils nationally.
- Children join the school from many different pre-school settings. Their skills vary, but a greater proportion of children have attainment above that usually expected, except in communication, language and literacy.
- Provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage has improved since the previous inspection and children now make good progress. They experience a wide range of purposeful activities that help to develop their early literacy and numeracy skills.
- The school identified that not all pupils were reaching the required standard in phonics and has introduced a new scheme that focuses on developing pupils' skills in understanding the sounds that letters make. Staff, parents and carers have noticed the difference this is making to pupils' confidence in reading new words.
- The proportion of pupils reaching the higher levels of attainment in all year groups is well above that expected. This is because most of the time more-able pupils are given sufficiently challenging work to do.
- Pupils thoroughly enjoy reading and most groups read widely. They talk about the authors they enjoy. However, there is a limited range of reading material that is suitably demanding for more-able pupils and this restricts them.
- Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs achieve well because very detailed records are kept of their progress and pupils receive support that is well tailored to their specific learning needs.
- Pupils supported by the pupil premium receive additional support from teachers and this enables them to make accelerated progress. In Year 4, in 2013, almost all eligible pupils reached national expectations or above in English and mathematics and their performance was similar to their peers.
- In Year 2, several of the pupils known to be eligible for free school meals also had special educational needs and made good progress from their low starting points. There were only a small number of eligible pupils in this year group and it is not possible to comment on their relative attainment without risk of identifying individual pupils.
- Pupils achieve well in mathematics because they have plenty of opportunities to discuss their ideas and solve problems in real-life situations. They are encouraged to choose how to record their findings to develop their mathematical thinking.
- Pupils make good progress in writing because they are given a clear structure around which to frame their work. They use rich vocabulary and receive high-quality feedback about how they can improve their writing. Pupils do not always have enough opportunity to write at length in

other subjects such as science and geography.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teachers are good at sharing what pupils are going to learn and how they can be successful. This helps pupils to judge how well they are doing during lessons.
- Pupils are confident learners. They give a clear reason for their answers during discussion and respond well to teachers' probing questions. They are used to sharing their ideas with a partner.
- Teaching is good in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Children are happy and settled. They engage in a wide range of interesting activities, both inside and in the spacious outdoor area. They also enjoy physical activity in the school hall, such as when re-enacting a familiar story.
- The teaching of phonics has improved because pupils are grouped according to ability and given a rigorous and systematic grounding in the sounds that letters make, so that they can apply their knowledge when reading and spelling. The new scheme is helping pupils to make rapid progress in reading.
- Teaching assistants make a valuable contribution to pupils' learning. They are trained well in supporting groups and individuals, and make sure that pupils develop the independence they need to thrive.
- Where the teaching is best, pupils are totally absorbed in their work and teachers have very high expectations of them. For example, Year 4 pupils were making designs for a pot in the style of the potter Clarice Cliffe with great care and attention. In a mathematics lesson, pupils used measurements they had gathered when learning about their bodies in science, to ask questions and devise theories about the data.
- On rare occasions, work is not difficult enough for all pupils and, when this happens, the pace of learning slows.
- Marking has improved considerably since the previous inspection. There are plenty of helpful comments that show pupils how to improve their work and pupils enter into a dialogue with their teachers about their learning. They act swiftly upon the advice they are given.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Pupils have extremely positive attitudes to learning. They are very keen to contribute to lessons and assemblies, and they work hard. They take great pride in their work and make sure that it is presented neatly.
- Pupils' behaviour is outstanding, both in class and around the school, and records show that this is the case over time. They show one another respect and consideration, and promote the school's values. They are keen to develop a 'growth mindset' (a set of positive attributes of learning used by the school), so that they can learn as well as possible. One pupil said, 'We love learning! We're up for a challenge.'
- Pupils say that bullying is not an issue, and they have every confidence in adults to deal with any concerns they may have. They know about different types of bullying, such as name-calling and cyber-bullying, and how to combat them.

- Pupils say they feel safe in school. This is a view supported by all parents and carers who responded to Parent View. They have an excellent understanding about how to keep safe; for example, when using the internet.
- The school council, drawn from all different groups of pupils, presents its views on a range of issues, including on how the new primary sport funding should be spent. Pupils said they wanted to learn how to skip.
- Attendance has been above average for some time, reflecting pupils' enjoyment of school.

The leadership and management are good

- The school has improved rapidly since the time of the previous inspection because of the relentless drive by leaders, managers and governors to raise achievement and move teaching to consistently good.
- The headteacher and deputy headteacher have built a strong and dedicated team of leaders and managers who are united in wanting the very best for all pupils. Their vision is shared by the whole staff, who expressed very positive views about how they are valued.
- Senior leaders and governors have developed the role of subject leaders well so that they play a key part in checking the quality of teaching and tracking pupils' progress. Staff receive detailed feedback about how well they are doing and what they could improve, and are set challenging targets through the management of their performance. This has helped teaching to improve over time and makes sure that all pupils have an equal chance to succeed, free from discrimination.
- Teachers visit one another's classrooms as part of a programme of 'lesson study' which enables them to share best practice and reflect on their work, learning from one another. High-quality training means that all staff are kept up to date with key initiatives, such as the new phonics programme. Individual support is given as required to make sure that all staff come up to a similar standard.
- The school has developed the curriculum to make it more relevant to pupils and gives them memorable experiences through 'forest schools' for example, and themed days such as the 'home front' in the Second World War, when pupils played the role of evacuees. The school promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well. Music is a particular strength, both through learning musical instruments and through singing.
- The school has plans to spend its primary school sport funding on additional coaches to work with pupils and train staff, and to help pupils to develop their skills in cycling, swimming, and, at their request, skipping. There are plans to measure the impact of this work on pupils' life skills, their health and well-being.
- All parents and carers who responded to Parent View said their children were happy at school and most were very positive about their learning. Some parents would like to receive more information about how their children are doing, something the school has taken on board.
- As an academy, the school employs its own consultants to support literacy and numeracy, and these have had a positive impact on the quality of teaching.

■ **The governance of the school:**

- Governors know the school very well. They understand what the national and school data is telling them about how well pupils are doing, and they know what teaching is like. They ask challenging questions of senior leaders and fulfil their responsibilities well. They know about the way the school sets targets for teachers, and how teachers' salary progression is linked to pupils' progress. They know what the school is doing to tackle any underperformance. Governors keep a close eye on the budget and make sure that the school represents value for money; for example through the way the pupil premium is spent. They ensure that the school meets all requirements for safeguarding pupils.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
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

Unique reference number	137756
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	425317

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

Type of school	First
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	4–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	280
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Richard A'Court
Headteacher	Adam Campbell
Date of previous school inspection	26 January 2012
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