

The Willows Primary School

Church Road, Basildon, SS14 2EX

Inspection dates

21–22 November 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement.

- Although progress is improving, it has not been rapid enough, particularly in Years 3 to 5 to enable pupils to catch up and reach the standards expected for their age.
- Teachers' marking does not always provide enough information to let pupils know how they can improve their work in order to reach the next level.
- Lessons to teach pupils how to read do not consistently develop their skills systematically.
- Teachers do not ask enough probing questions to help pupils think more deeply about their learning.
- Good teaching is not yet the norm; too much teaching still requires improvement.
- Some teachers spend too much time talking so that pupils do not spend enough time on the activities or complete sufficient work in the time available.
- Teachers do not all have high expectations of what pupils can do. Frequently, teaching is not adjusted sufficiently so that work set for some pupils is too easy while being too hard for others.
- The quality of pupils' handwriting and presentation is not consistently high across the school.

The school has the following strengths

- The headteacher, supported by senior and other leaders, continues to provide strong leadership so that the quality of teaching and pupils' rate of progress are both improving.
- Pupils get off to a good start in the Nursery and Reception classes.
- Teaching in Year 6 is good so that pupils have been able to catch up on some of their lost ground in previous years when teaching has been inadequate.
- Behaviour in and around the school is consistently good. Pupils are eager to learn and engage well in their lessons. They feel safe.
- Pupils are very proud of their school and really enjoy coming to school.
- The wide range of enrichment activities is thoroughly enjoyed by all pupils. These have contributed very strongly to developing high self-esteem for vulnerable pupils and raised morale throughout the school.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 25 lessons, of which two were observed jointly with the headteacher. Inspectors also observed pupils moving around the school, in the dining room, during enrichment activities and at break and lunchtimes. They listened to a number of pupils read.
- Meetings were held with pupils, senior leaders, including subject and other leaders, a group of governors, including the Chair of the Governing Body, and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors took account of the 51 responses to Parent View, Ofsted’s online questionnaire, as well as parents’ spoken views. Inspectors took account of 52 staff questionnaires.
- Inspectors looked closely at a range of documentation, including the school’s information about the progress of pupils, the school’s view of its own performance, plans for improvement, safeguarding policies and records relating to the management of teachers’ performance.

Inspection team

Nichola Perry, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Janette Daniels

Additional Inspector

Anthony Woodward

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is much larger than the average-sized primary school.
- The majority of the pupils are White British.
- The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium funding (additional money given to schools for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals, children looked after by the local authority and some others) is much higher than average.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs supported through school action is lower than average. The proportion of pupils supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is broadly average.
- The school did not meet the government's floor standards in 2013, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress in English and mathematics.
- The headteacher joined the school in January 2012. The school was judged to no longer require special measures in November 2012.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that good teaching becomes the norm so as to rapidly raise attainment in reading, writing and mathematics to at least the levels expected, by ensuring all teachers:
 - have higher expectations of what pupils can achieve year on year and set work which is more demanding than in the past
 - pay due regard to re-shaping activities during lessons so that they take full account of all pupils' individual needs
 - teach consistently high-quality phonics lessons across the school, in line with those in Early Years Foundation Stage, so that pupils' skills are developed in a systematic way
 - spend less time talking, thereby increasing time available for pupils to be actively involved in their learning so that they produce much more work, especially writing, in the time available
 - develop their questioning skills so that they can encourage pupils to think more deeply about their learning
 - make their marking more explicit so as to help pupils understand clearly what it is they have to do to improve their work and timetable regular sessions for pupils to respond to comments
 - have higher expectations regarding the quality of pupils' handwriting and the presentation of their work.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils requires improvement

- Pupils, particularly those in Years 3 to 5, have not made the consistently rapid progress necessary to reach at least the standards expected for their age in reading, writing and mathematics. Nevertheless, there are clear signs that pupils in all year groups are now making better progress than in the past in all three subjects.
- As at the previous inspection, children continue to get off to a good start in the Early Years Foundation Stage. They make good progress from their low starting points, particularly in their speech, language and communication skills, and are prepared well for learning in Year 1.
- Children, particularly in the Nursery class, learn quickly in bright, busy and stimulating classrooms because they are taught well and given interesting things to do. Excellent teaching in the Nursery class helps children to rapidly become independent and develop a delight in learning and achieving.
- The strong emphasis on speaking and listening, thinking and problem solving is effective in helping children to develop good personal and social skills on which the rest of the school can build. Phonics (the sounds that letters make) is taught effectively so that children are motivated and well equipped to identify letters and words as they develop their reading skills.
- The teaching of phonics in Years 1 and 2 is less well developed, especially when teachers use generic programmes which are not sufficiently focused on the actual needs of the pupils. Recently introduced guided-reading lessons and other catch-up sessions are having a positive impact on pupils' enjoyment and progress in reading.
- Attainment by the end of Year 2 has been erratic in recent years and progress has been slow. Nevertheless, following a dip in 2012, a significant improvement in 2013 means that standards in mathematics and reading are closer to those expected and standards in writing are now average. School data indicate that pupils' progress is continuing to improve.
- Attainment by the end of Year 6 has declined in recent years because pupils have not made enough progress to reach the standards expected for their age in reading, writing and mathematics. This is the result of a lengthy legacy of inadequate teaching, which has left pupils with very considerable gaps in their prior learning. Good teaching in Year 6 is now helping to get pupils closer to the standards expected.
- Although pupils are not yet consistently making sufficiently rapid progress in all classes, increasingly effective teaching in Years 3 to 6, especially in Year 6, is leading to improvement. Teachers are now needing to spend less time helping older pupils catch up and instead place greater emphasis on encouraging pupils to apply and extend their learning. School data indicate a significant improvement in progress and attainment for current Year 6 pupils.
- Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs make similar progress to their classmates. They are beginning to make better progress than in the past because their learning is now better planned and structured and they receive good support from teaching assistants. Focused teaching groups for more able pupils are helping to accelerate their progress because learning is now increasingly pitched at a level more appropriate to their needs.
- Until very recently, procedures for assessing how well pupils are performing have been weak so

that information about pupils' performance has been inaccurate and unreliable. Teachers across the school now have a much-improved understanding of how to assess their pupils which is leading to work which better meets the needs of all pupils.

- Across the school, improvements in planning and the introduction of more-structured learning are making a strong contribution to a more meaningful learning experience for all pupils. This is resulting in more pupils than in recent years making better progress, so that they are now beginning to work at a higher level than in the past.
- Pupil premium funding is used creatively to provide a wide range of additional support and activities to help eligible pupils catch up, along with their classmates. Nevertheless, the gap in progress and attainment between these pupils and their peers remains. In 2013, they were between two and three terms behind other pupils in reading, writing and mathematics. Current school data, however, demonstrate that the gap between their attainment and that of other pupils in reading, writing and mathematics is starting to reduce.

The quality of teaching

requires improvement

- There is not enough consistently good teaching to accelerate pupils' learning. Although a considerable proportion of teaching observed during the inspection was good, and sometimes better, there is still too much variation in the quality of teaching overall. Too much teaching, as reflected in pupils' books and learning outcomes, still requires improvement.
- Teachers plan work which is meaningful and interesting for pupils and activities generally match pupils' wide range of abilities. Where teaching is especially effective, teachers ensure that activities take full account of where the pupils are at, whether for lower- or higher-ability pupils. This vital element of teaching, which is not yet the norm, facilitates good learning and faster progress as more pupils are starting to work at a higher level than in the past.
- Pupils demonstrate very positive attitudes to learning, even when lessons are less challenging than they should be. They are keen to learn and say that they now really enjoy their learning because it is much more interesting than in previous years. Pupils' ability to rise to additional challenge is very evident in effective lessons where activities are explained quickly and modelled effectively, thus allowing pupils to get started on their work.
- In too many lessons, however, teachers do not have sufficiently high expectations of what pupils of all abilities can achieve and spend too much time talking. This diminishes pupils' enthusiasm and significantly reduces time available for actually doing the work. Pupils' books show too little work in the time available, especially their writing, and this limits their rate of progress considerably. Expectations regarding handwriting and presentation are also not sufficiently high.
- Teachers and teaching assistants use questioning well to support, challenge and ascertain how well pupils are learning. Many teaching assistants model their good practice on the teachers so that they provide effective support for pupils who find learning difficult. In the best lessons, teachers use effective in-depth questioning which probes pupils' understanding and encourages them to really think about their responses. This high-quality skill is not yet being developed across the school.
- Constructive feedback in lessons helps pupils understand how well they are doing. Pupils say that they find this useful. The best marking provides effective pointers for pupils to improve their work. Overall, however, the quality of marking throughout the school is too variable. Not enough time is provided for pupils to respond to teachers' comments.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Good behaviour is evident everywhere in the school, including on the playground, in the dining room and throughout enrichment activities in the hall. At no time was anything less than good behaviour seen in any lesson or when moving around the school. On a very wet day during the inspection, when pupils were unable to go outside, their behaviour was excellent. Behaviour in the Nursery class is outstanding.
- Pupils fully understand how the behaviour policy applies to them. They are very aware of the consequences of their actions. They speak knowledgeably about rewards and sanctions used by the school. Pupils say that the behaviour seen during the inspection is typical now but most definitely not in the past when they felt unsafe. They are quick to say how much the school has changed for the better and that everything has improved since the new headteacher arrived.
- Pupils now feel very safe and their parents agree. They know how to keep themselves and others safe, including when using the internet. Pupils understand well what is and is not bullying. They know what actions to take should it occur and trust adults to help them if necessary. They talk confidently about the different forms of bullying, including inappropriate use of language towards different groups, and take very seriously their roles as anti-bullying ambassadors.
- Relationships between pupils throughout the school are very good. They work productively together in pairs or small groups and say they enjoy working together in group activities. In lessons, pupils listen attentively to their teachers and each other. They are considerate towards each other and readily accept difference without judging. They no longer consider the 'good' pupils to be unfairly treated.
- Pupils feel safe to make a mistake in lessons and are prepared to have a go, even if they are wrong. They understand well that their teachers value their contributions and appear proud, when some teachers get them to explain their answers in greater detail. Younger pupils learn quickly that their ideas are valued, when their suggestions about what they would like to learn are readily accepted by their teachers.
- Pupils are proud of their school now and love coming to school. This is reflected in ongoing improvement in attendance and punctuality. Pupils cannot speak highly enough of the enrichment activities and how they are allowed to 'dress down' during their day of activities each week. The early morning sessions have proved very successful in getting some reluctant pupils into school so that they can access their one-to-one support sessions.
- There is good support for all pupils so that they feel safe and can develop into happy members of the community. Wide-ranging support, including many links with external agencies, is available for pupils and their families whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Pupils new to the school are helped to settle well so that they quickly blend in with other pupils.

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher continues to provide strong leadership so that there has been further improvement since the previous inspection just a year ago. His clear vision and aspirations for the school are shared unanimously by all staff, governors and the pupils themselves. Parents are also very supportive and recognise how the school is continuing to change.

- Senior leaders monitor all aspects of provision regularly and rigorously. A recent full review of the subjects taught now provides pupils with improved opportunities for learning and practising their skills across a range of subjects. A wide range of visits, visitors and links with the local community enrich pupils' learning and personal development well and promote their spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness.
- Leadership roles, particularly in English, mathematics, Early Years Foundation Stage and special educational needs, are developing well and contribute strongly to pupils' improving progress. Meetings which track pupils' progress are now held half termly so as to keep a closer check on how well pupils are performing.
- Planning which guides school improvement helps all staff understand what they have to do next and ensures that leaders' evaluation of the school's performance, such as the quality of teaching, is accurate. The carefully planned programme to support and coach weaker teachers, has led to some significant improvements in teaching since the previous inspection.
- Revised procedures to manage staff performance are used effectively to develop and reward good practice. Staff value the good-quality professional development they receive and acknowledge how it has helped to improve their practice. The process also ensures that underperforming staff have good opportunities to improve.
- The school uses pupil premium funding, additional funding for sport and other funds, extremely effectively to benefit pupils. A twice weekly, school-wide programme of enrichment activities, as well as reinstating a range of competitive sporting activities, has contributed strongly to raising morale throughout the school and, in particular, helping vulnerable pupils develop their self-esteem.
- The local authority has provided wide-ranging support for this school while in special measures and subsequently. It is committed to a continued high level of support to aid further improvement towards becoming a good school.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body continues to provide good support and challenge to the school. Their knowledge base about all aspects of the school has increased considerably so that they are now sufficiently skilled to enable them to ask the necessary searching questions. They are precise about the school's ongoing weaknesses and areas of strength. They have a secure understanding of published data about the school's performance and are fully involved in planning for improvement. Governors demonstrate clear understanding of how staff are held strongly to account for their performance and that of their pupils, including the use of funds to reward good practice. They are appropriately involved in actions taken to manage underperformance. Governors understand the need to raise the bar as pupils continue to make better progress and they fully recognise that the school still has a way to go. Governors know how funding is spent and ensure adequate funds are made available to provide the best for the pupils. Governors expressed deep disappointment regarding the significant dip in attendance during 2012–2013 and the accompanying drop in attainment at the end of Year 6, when parents refused to send their children to school during the collapse of the entire central heating system. Governors ensure that current national requirements for safeguarding pupils are met.

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	132084
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	425143

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	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	502
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Martin Pretlove
Headteacher	David Bridge
Date of previous school inspection	13 November 2012
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