

The Ferns Primary Academy

Plodder Lane, Bolton, Lancashire, BL4 0DA

Inspection dates 14–15 May 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
	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. It is not good because

- By the end of Year 6, standards that pupils reach are well below those seen nationally in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Pupils' achievement is not consistent between key stages and across year groups. Too few pupils make better than expected progress
- The quality of teaching is not good enough.
- Expectations of what pupils can achieve are not always high enough. Tasks do not provide enough challenge, especially for the most able, to enable pupils to learn as quickly as they should.
- Information about pupils' understanding is not used well enough to plan for their next steps in learning.
- The impact of teaching assistants on pupils' learning is inconsistent.

The school has the following strengths

- The Principal has a clear understanding of what needs to be improved and has made an excellent start in steering the school in the right direction. As a result, both teaching and pupils' achievement are improving rapidly.
- Governors are well informed and share the Principal's determination and commitment to turning the school around.
- Pupils are proud of their school and they have very positive relations with staff. They feel safe and behave well both in lessons and around the school.
- Good relationships exist with parents and with the local community.
- Successful partnerships with the local authority and the school's sponsoring trust are helping to improve the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement.

Information about this inspection

- The inspectors observed 20 lessons or part lessons taught by 12 teachers. Two lessons were observed jointly with the Principal.
- Inspectors talked with pupils and listened to some Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 pupils reading. Pupils' current work and assessments were scrutinised. Inspectors also observed pupils at lunchtime and during their break times.
- Meetings were held with senior leaders, staff, members of the governing body, representatives of the school's sponsoring trust and the local authority.
- Inspectors looked closely at the school's work, including minutes of meetings of the governing body, the school's analysis of how well it is doing and its improvement plan, documents relating to behaviour and safeguarding and the school's data on pupils' progress.
- The inspectors took account of the 15 responses from parents recorded in the online questionnaire (Parent View). Inspectors also had informal conversations with groups of parents at the start of the school day.
- The inspectors took account of the 25 responses to the staff inspection questionnaire.

Inspection team

Michael Hewlett, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Marilyn Massey	Additional Inspector
Paul Smith	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- This school is larger than the average-sized primary school.
- The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds is above the national average, as is the proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of pupils eligible to support from the pupil premium funding is well-above average. The pupil premium is additional funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and children looked after by the local authority.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is above average. The proportion of pupils supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is below average.
- In 2013, the school met the government's current floor standard which is the minimum expectation for pupils' attainment and progress in English and mathematics by the end of Year 6.
- In September 2012, the school became a sponsor-led academy, becoming part of the Northern Education Trust. The current Principal took up post at the same time.
- There have been significant changes to the school since it became an academy, including a high turnover of staff.
- A breakfast and after-school club are provided by the school.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better in order to accelerate pupils' progress in all subjects by:
 - increasing expectations about what pupils can achieve and always set work that is hard enough for pupils of all abilities, particularly the most able
 - checking on pupils' understanding while they are learning and adjusting tasks so that pupils do as well as they can
 - making sure that teaching assistants have a greater impact on pupils' learning.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

requires improvement

- Achievement requires improvement because pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics across the school is not yet rapid enough to compensate for a legacy of underachievement. Too few of the most able pupils reach the higher levels of which they are capable.
- Children generally start the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills that are well below those typical for their age, especially in their personal development, communication and number skills. However, owing to the good teaching that they now receive, most children make good progress from their different starting points, especially in their ability to take care of themselves. Nevertheless, by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, children's skills are still below those typical for their age.
- As a relatively new school, the only external attainment data refer to pupils' performance in the 2013 tests. For pupils in Year 2, this confirmed that standards were well below the national average in all the subjects, with very few pupils reaching the higher levels.
- The 2013 results for pupils in Year 6 showed a similar picture of low attainment with standards that were well below average. Again few pupils reached the higher levels in reading, writing or mathematics.
- Checks on the work of pupils currently in the school and records of how well pupils are learning show that pupils' progress is improving rapidly on that seen last year. For example, in Year 2, pupils are on target to reach the standard close to, and in some cases above, what is expected for their age in reading, writing and mathematics. These improvements are due to the better teaching that pupils have received during the year.
- Standards reached by current Year 6 pupils remain below the national average but records show that most pupils in this year group are making better than expected progress over the two years from when the academy opened in 2012. The most able pupils although making similar progress to others are still lagging behind because they are not always given tasks that are hard enough.
- Pupils enjoy reading in school and at home and were enthusiastic as they told inspectors about their favourite authors. Standards in reading are rising because of better teaching, targeted support and the school's focus on improving pupils' skills in phonics (letters and the sounds that they make). In 2013, the proportion of pupils in Year 1 that reached the expected standard in the national screening check on their knowledge of phonics was below average. Records of the current Year 1 pupils show an improving picture, with standards that are close to average.
- In 2013, standards reached by pupils in Year 6 who were supported by pupil premium funding and who were known to be eligible for free school meals were below those reached by their classmates by approximately three terms. The school's information shows that this gap has closed rapidly and, in the current Year 6, pupils supported by the pupil premium funding are making the same rates of progress and reaching the same standards in English and mathematics as those who are not supported by this funding.
- Disabled pupils, those with special educational needs and those who are at an early stage of learning to speak English as an additional language are fully included in all learning activities. They receive good support and their progress is carefully tracked. This demonstrates the school's commitment to providing equal opportunities for all pupils. These groups of pupils make rates of progress that are similar to and sometimes better than their classmates.

The quality of teaching

requires improvement

- Teaching requires improvement because it is not yet good enough to help all pupils make consistently rapid progress.
- Expectations of what pupils can achieve are not always high enough and this is particularly the

case for the most able pupils. Consequently, pupils spend too long on work that is too easy for them or mark time as they wait for some of their classmates to catch up. An example of this was seen in Key Stage 2 where pupils were investigating the properties of Venn diagrams. Some members of the group finished their work quickly and accurately without too much difficulty. After waiting patiently, their follow up activity did not challenge them. This helps to explain why too few pupils are reaching higher levels.

- Staff have good subject knowledge and, in most classes, question and answer sessions are productive. Pupils learn faster when they are given the opportunity to explain their understanding of a topic, often to a partner or to the rest of the group. This happens regularly. Occasionally, pupils' learning slows when adults fail to use the information they have gathered on pupils' levels of understanding well enough, in order to adjust the tasks that are set during the next part of the activity. For example, in Key Stage 1 in literacy it became clear that some pupils were struggling to read the text. Changes were not made quickly enough, resulting in slower progress for some pupils.
- Teaching assistants generally have a positive impact on pupils' learning. This is especially the case when they are working with the least able pupils. However, at times, teaching assistants give too much support, which means that pupils do not learn as much as they should. For example, when teaching assistants answer some of the questions that they have posed to pupils, without giving the pupils enough time to think of an answer for themselves.
- Despite these weaknesses, the quality of teaching and pupils' learning are improving rapidly across the school. This has resulted from the Principal's passion to drive pupils' learning forward, her regular review of learning and constant checks on staff and pupils' performance. Joint observations made by the inspection team and Principal, and scrutiny of pupils' work over time, confirmed the accuracy of her judgements. They painted a picture of strongly improving teaching and learning.
- In the Early Years Foundation Stage, children's learning has been transformed by the extensive range of opportunities and experiences that are on offer to them. For example, their understanding of how to take care of themselves and to talk confidently about what they have seen has been enhanced by the arrival of the school hens, which they look after. 'We all take turns to feed them and I know just what they need to keep alive', was how one child in the Reception class described his responsibilities.
- Throughout the school, excellent relationships between pupils and adults are the hallmark of most activities and this contributes to this highly purposeful and supportive learning community.
- Pupils have regular opportunities to practise and consolidate their reading, writing and mathematical skills in other subjects. Indeed, using and applying the core skills are strong features of pupils' learning across all the year groups. For example, pupils successfully used these skills when they researched the class topic or theme. In a Key Stage 2 local study, pupils presented their research findings in graphs, diagrams, reports and checklists, showing just how versatile and competent they had become in choosing the right mathematical or written method.
- Pupils' work is marked consistently well and adults' comments give clear written guidance on what pupils need to do to improve. Homework is set regularly and this too helps to consolidate pupils' learning.

The behaviour and safety of pupils is good

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Pupils are friendly, polite and very proud of their school. They enjoy speaking to adults and older pupils are quick to point out just how much has changed in the school over the last two years. 'Children were always messing, fighting and getting sent home but that doesn't happen now', was how a Year 5 pupil described the turn round. Scrutiny of the school's behaviour logs and pupils' records supports this rosy picture of improved behaviour both in classes and around the school. This, in turn, contributes to a much improved climate for learning.
- Pupils have a good understanding of different forms of bullying, including cyber bullying, but, as

with behaviour, they are confident that it is an improving picture. 'There is hardly any bullying now and, if there is, the teachers soon sort it out', was how one boy in Year 6 described his experience of the school.

- The school council and eco-teams take their responsibilities very seriously and are confident their views are listened to and valued. They cite examples of where school leaders consult them on major changes to the school and asked them what they would like included when the playground is developed.
- Teachers and the school's family liaison officer work successfully in partnership with families to tackle attendance and punctuality issues. Regular attendance is celebrated and parents say that the school is doing all that it can in this area. Persistent absence is decreasing and attendance is improving and is close to average.
- The school's breakfast and after-school clubs are well run. They provide good quality care enabling pupils to enjoy a calm and purposeful start and end to their school day.
- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good. The site is kept secure and pupils say they feel safe with 'teachers and children always ready to help you if you need them'. Parents and staff, who expressed an opinion all agreed with this view.
- Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe and know about the potential hazards of the internet.

The leadership and management

is good

- Key to the rapid improvements found in teaching and pupils' achievement across the school, is the strong and determined leadership of the Principal. She works closely with other school leaders and, in partnership with the governing body, they form a highly effective team that is tackling the legacy of past underperformance and has rooted out inadequate teaching.
- There is good care and support for groups of pupils who are at risk of not doing as well as they should. For example, school leaders have identified that the most able pupils should be reaching higher levels and have taken urgent action that is beginning to address this gap in performance. It illustrates the way that everyone's needs in the school are respected and discrimination of any kind is not tolerated.
- The school's view of its own performance is accurate and the school's priorities are the right ones. Improving pupils' literacy and numeracy skills is viewed as paramount and rigorous monitoring of pupils' progress confirms that these improvements are having a positive impact. The school's vision to become a high performing school is embraced by the whole-school community. 'I cannot believe the changes that I have seen in this school since the new Principal arrived. She keeps me informed about what is happening and listens to us. Children's behaviour is so much better and they are really proud of their school. I've recommended it to all of my friends', is typical of the comments made by parents when they met with inspectors.
- Performance management systems are robust with teachers held to account for the progress made by pupils in their class. Staff have challenging but achievable targets and pay progression is closely linked to performance.
- Middle leaders have played a central part in supporting the aims of the Principal since the school opened. Their leadership skills have been developed effectively and some move up the leadership hierarchy to take on senior roles. Improvements in teaching and pupils' achievement across the school are good examples of middle leaders having a positive impact.
- Providing pupils with subjects and clubs that keep them interested and allow them to be successful is another reason why pupils' behaviour and progress are improving. Pupils are quick to say how much they enjoy a wide range of musical, artistic and physical activities. Whole classes playing violins illustrated just what pupils could achieve when they listened carefully, cooperated and practised. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted strongly across all the subjects.
- Good use has been made of primary school sport funding to improve the quality of sports coaching. Pupils' participation is increasing in a wide range of clubs and this is improving their

well-being.

- Good support for the school is provided through a successful partnership between the local authority and the sponsoring trust. Working well together, they have contributed to the school's improving picture of teaching and pupils' achievement.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governance is good. Working closely with school leaders, the governing body has been decisive in tackling underperformance and weaker teaching. It has supported the Principal well during the many challenges she has faced, as well as holding her to account for the school's performance. Governors, including those new to the role, bring valuable skills and share the same vision for school improvement. They have a clear and accurate view of the school's performance and know its strengths and weaknesses well.
 - Governors monitor the school's budget carefully and have ensured that the pupil premium funding is helping eligible pupils to make better progress throughout the school. Similarly, they have also used extra sports funding well. Governors ensure that arrangements to safeguard pupils meet requirements.

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	138399
Local authority	Bolton
Inspection number	440082

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	340
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Steven Dale
Principal	Debra Murphy
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01204 4333019
Fax number	Not applicable
Email address	murphyd@thefernsacademy.org

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