

Alnwick the Dukes Middle School

Hope House Lane, Alnwick, Northumberland, NE66 1UN

Inspection dates 24–25 September 2014

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- The crystal-clear vision and drive of the headteacher has ensured that action has been effective in eradicating past underachievement. Senior leaders know exactly what the school needs to do to sustain the considerable gains made.
- Good and occasionally outstanding teaching enables pupils from all starting points, including those with special educational needs and the disadvantaged, to achieve well.
- Teaching is good, because teachers make learning interesting and constantly urge pupils to work hard. Well thought-out and organised support ensures that the potentially vulnerable pupils can achieve well.
- High-quality care and support contributes effectively to the happy, nurturing school atmosphere.
- Behaviour is good and occasionally exemplary. Mean or unkind behaviour is infrequent. Pupils are friendly, considerate and helpful. They display responsible attitudes and are safety conscious.
- Pupils develop highly positive attitudes to learning, conduct themselves well and enjoy life in school. This is reflected in their above-average attendance. Consequently, all are keen and eager to be successful, study and achieve well.
- The needs and interests of pupils are really well understood by staff. The stimulating variety of first-hand learning experiences meets their needs well.
- Effective, collaborative working within the federation of schools and with the local authority is an emerging strength of the school's successful drive to improve.
- Governance is highly supportive and robust in its challenge to school leaders and managers.
- Senior leaders, including governors, and subject leaders form a strong, effective team. They are united in their drive to raise standards. Their decisive actions are having a successful impact on improving the school, particularly pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- There is not sufficient outstanding teaching to produce a consistent and sustained pattern of rapid progress and high achievement in all subjects.
- Occasionally, opportunities are missed to expect more of pupils of all abilities, such as in their writing, demand higher standards, stretch their thinking and offer clear guidance for improvement.

Information about this inspection

- The inspectors observed 13 lessons, including three paired observations and work scrutiny carried out with the headteacher and deputy headteacher. In addition, they made a number of short visits to lessons and undertook learning walks around the school in order to check the quality of what is provided for pupils.
- Inspectors spoke with pupils and had discussions with the headteacher, parents attending a community lunch with their children, subject leaders, staff, governors and the local authority associate school improvement adviser.
- They also examined a range of documents including those related to safeguarding, the school's view of how well it is doing, the monitoring of staff performance, the school's improvement plan and records relating to pupils' progress and behaviour.
- The inspectors took account of 25 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) and eight responses to the staff questionnaire.

Inspection team

Clive Petts, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Barbara Waugh

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- It is a smaller-than-average-sized middle school.
- The school is in a hard federation with another middle school and high school. Each of the schools has its own headteacher. There is one federated governing body, with each of the schools having a nominated group of governors who form a steering group, which works directly with the school and reports to the full governing body.
- Almost all of the pupils are of White British backgrounds. Very few pupils speak English as an additional language.
- A higher-than-average number of pupils joins or leaves the school at other than the usual time.
- The proportion of pupils supported through school action is marginally above average. The proportion supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is above that usually found.
- Currently, there is a broadly average proportion of disadvantaged pupils eligible for pupil premium funding. The pupil premium is additional funding provided for students who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those who are looked after by the local authority.
- A very few pupils are from service families and are supported through the services premium.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of teaching that is inspiring and stimulating to make certain the rising trend of faster progress and higher achievement is sustained by:
 - raising staff expectations even higher of what pupils of all abilities and starting points can do and achieve
 - sharing teachers' imaginative and thought-provoking practice more widely across the school
 - maximising the opportunities for pupils to practise different types of writing across all subjects, including their extended writing
 - ensuring that the accuracy of layout and presentation of pupils' work in all books is of a consistently high quality
 - improving teachers' written feedback in books to help pupils improve, making certain it is concise and well defined and ensuring that pupils correct their mistakes.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- Since the previous inspection, the headteacher, skilfully supported by the deputy headteacher, has successfully re-energized the whole staff. Staff share her ambitions of just how successful the school can be. Resolute approaches have established clear staff roles, with rigorous systems in place, including robust external moderation, to check the school's performance. As a result self-evaluation is accurate.
- Subject leaders are effectively adding essential drive and diligence to sustain faster progress and eliminate any variations in the quality of learning. This is evident in the closing of attainment gaps between the disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged.
- Teaching is well led and managed; with all staff responding positively to the well-thought-out training that is provided. Specific improvement priorities have been established and leaders are increasingly precise in establishing measurable benchmarks and tight timescales to check the impact of all improvement action. As a result the pace of school improvement is quickening.
- Performance management is well established and there is no automatic pay progression.
- The good curriculum provides a wide range of interesting experiences, including visits and visitors that help bring learning to life. There is good guidance and provision to develop pupils' social and personal skills, which prepare pupils well for their next stage of learning. There is firm emphasis on literacy and numeracy, although opportunities are sometimes missed to practise skills across all subjects, such as in writing. The curriculum is regularly adjusted to ensure all pupils have an equal opportunity to succeed and achieve well. This includes for those who join the school at other than the normal time.
- The primary school sport funding is utilised effectively to enhance staff coaching skills, increase participation rates and nurture higher skills across a diverse range of sports
- Safeguarding and child protection meet requirements. Procedures are clearly and firmly established and much good practice is adopted in the day-to-day management, care and protection of pupils.
- The local authority has an accurate view of school performance and challenges and supports in equal measure. Collaborative working across the federation is a developing strength, making certain that there is a relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching, raising pupils' achievement and enriching attitudes to learning.
- The school's own parent surveys and responses to the online questionnaire reveal a growing confidence in the effectiveness of the school to ensure that all pupils achieve well.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body have an accurate view of the school's performance, because they challenge and hold leaders and managers to account for the quality of teaching and learning. They take full advantage of training. They openly acknowledge that in the past they have not been sharply focused and challenging enough. Governors accurately analyse school performance using available information, including the evaluation of the impact of those disadvantaged pupils in receipt of extra funding. They also ensure that performance management is rigorous.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Whether in classrooms, corridors or playgrounds, pupils behave responsibly and sensibly with a minimum of supervision. Pupils are happy and friendly, answering visitors' questions enthusiastically and politely. They show high levels of respect for adults and each other.
- Attitudes to learning are positive, because pupils are eager and keen to learn. They listen well and sometimes exceptionally well, and show resilience when confronted with complex and demanding tasks. Behaviour in classrooms is never less than good even when tasks are less interesting and the difficulty of work is pitched a little too low.
- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good. Almost all parents agree. In conversations with pupils, they remark that they feel safe and that staff are quick to listen to any worries they may have. Pupils are well informed about risk and danger and learn how to avoid hazards, such as when using the internet.
- In conversations with pupils, they demonstrate a good grasp of bullying in all of its forms, including prejudiced-based bullying. The school's anti-bullying strategies are effectively promoted in assemblies, through role play and in displays. Pupils are well aware of the essential action they need to take to prevent and stop any bullying. They report bullying is not an issue and that any incidents are infrequent and display confidence that staff will deal with any incidents promptly.

- Pupils of all ages thrive on responsibility. This is evident in the respect and care older pupils show towards younger pupils throughout the day. They take pride in their own and the school's achievements. This prepares them well for life in the modern world around them.
- Attendance has improved to above average as a consequence of the effective school and federation strategies and action taken to help and support families where their children's attendance is sometimes irregular.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teaching is good and occasionally outstanding. The headteacher, ably supported by a committed staff, has worked tirelessly to improve the quality of learning. Underperformance has been resolutely tackled.
- The increasingly imaginative use of themes and topics links learning across subjects in interesting ways. Activities encourage pupils to think critically, explain their thinking and justify their ideas and decisions. For example, following their visit to a drift coal mine at Beamish Museum, pupils spoke avidly and knowledgeably when reflecting upon how the skills of miners were used to tunnel under German trenches in the First World War.
- When pupils' progress is faster and achievement higher:
 - activities are thought-provoking and much is demanded of pupils of all backgrounds
 - tasks are closely matched and constantly adapted to pupils' abilities, needs and interests
 - skilful questioning continuously checks on and tests pupils' thinking, relentlessly stretching their knowledge and understanding and eliminating any misconceptions
 - interesting and challenging tasks 'fire up' thinking and encourage pupils to consider problems and formulate solutions.
- When rates of progress are a little more variable and in the few instances that achievement requires improvement:
 - methods employed lack that essential trigger to provoke thinking and stretch knowledge and understanding
 - not enough is expected of pupils and activities are not always well enough matched to pupils' abilities and needs, with opportunities missed to practise their skills, such as writing
 - questions do not check and test understanding frequently enough and address misconceptions
 - marking does not always ensure that pupils are in no doubt about exactly how to improve and that mistakes require correction.
- In most teaching, questioning relentlessly holds pupils' interest and constantly engages and challenges pupils' thinking. For example, an older group of pupils were observed totally absorbed in using software creatively to construct an exciting computer game. Nevertheless, these stimulating methods do not feature in all classes and activities and opportunities are sometimes overlooked to demand higher standards, such as in the accuracy, layout and presentation of pupils' work.
- Most teachers systematically mark and accurately assess pupils' work. When this is the case, pupils are clear about the targets that are set for them and their progress against them. Despite much good-quality marking, clear and concise written guidance in books is not consistently provided and corrections not always completed before starting a new piece of work.

The achievement of pupils is good

- On entry, pupils' experience and skill are broadly those expected for their age, although cohorts do vary a great deal. This is confirmed by the school's evaluation of pupils' progress, which the inspectors found to be accurate.
- In national tests at the end of Year 6 in 2013, standards were broadly average in reading, writing and mathematics, but well below average in grammar, punctuation and spelling. The proportion of pupils making progress at the expected rate was close to the national average, but few exceeded expected rates.
- Concerted action taken by the headteacher, driving wide-ranging improvements in the quality of teaching, has led to large gains in progress rates and achievement since the previous inspection. Consequently, progress has quickened and standards have risen. Unvalidated national test results at the end of Year 6 in 2014, reveal a pattern of above-average standards in reading, writing and mathematics. Grammar, punctuation and spelling skills were significantly improved. A much higher-than-average number of pupils exceeded expected levels in reading and mathematics. In writing, the number was at the national

average. Inspection evidence confirms that current Year 6 pupils are on track to achieve well and reach at least above-average standards.

- This pattern of improvement continues in Year 7 and Year 8, although progress rates are a little more variable than in Year 5 and Year 6. By the end of Year 8 in 2014, standards were well-above expectation in reading and mathematics and above expectations in writing. Increased numbers of pupils were exceeding expectations.
- Those pupils with special educational needs made the same good progress as their classmates, because their needs are quickly and accurately identified and their support closely matched to their individual needs.
- The most able pupils are expected to work hard and are challenged well. Increasingly, teachers are demanding more of them. For example, school information confirmed by work scrutiny, indicates that an increased proportion of Year 6 pupils are on course to achieve the highest levels in reading, writing and mathematics. In the current Year 8, increased numbers of pupils are working well-above expectations for their age.
- The school is successfully narrowing the gap in standards between non-disadvantaged and disadvantaged pupils, both within the school and with similar groups nationally. At the end of Year 6 in 2013, disadvantaged pupils were at least two terms behind their peers in reading, writing and mathematics, both in school and that found nationally. The school's own records, confirmed by inspection evidence, reveal that current gaps are close to one term in all subjects and closing steadily.
- Pupils read widely and confidently, with good fluency and understanding demonstrated. This is the result of a whole-school drive to provide extensive opportunities for pupils to read interesting books each day. This helps develop their skills well and boosts enjoyment of reading. Younger pupils who occasionally lack the skills to confidently and accurately make sense of new words are thoughtfully helped and supported.

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	122353
Local authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	428879

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

Type of school	Middle deemed secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	9–13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	152
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Lalage Bosanquet
Headteacher	Dawn Morton
Date of previous school inspection	26 September 2012
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