

Thropton Village First School

Thropton, Morpeth, Northumberland NE65 7JD

Inspection dates

8–9 December 2015

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Early years provision	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Instability in leadership and management has resulted in an overall decline in the school's effectiveness. Governors and senior leaders do not have a clear enough picture of how well all pupils are doing.
- Leaders have not yet secured effective systems for measuring the progress of all groups of pupils. The processes for identifying children with particular educational needs, including those who may have specific talents, are not yet embedded.
- Subject leadership is underdeveloped and this is inhibiting pupils' progress and achievement across subjects. Subject leaders do not fully monitor the progress and achievement of all groups of pupils in their subject across each key stage.
- Teaching is not consistently good. In lessons, some groups of pupils, including the most able, are not sufficiently challenged or supported by adults, across subjects.
- Adults' expectations of pupils are too low. Some teachers do not build effectively on what pupils already know and can do in order to ensure that rapid progress is made by all.
- Pupils do not read or write at length frequently enough and too many have low expectations of themselves as readers and authors.
- Pupils are not always engaged by the curriculum and teaching. Progress slows and pupils are less focused when the work is too easy or too difficult.
- The quality of teaching and learning in the early years requires improvement. Teachers do not provide opportunities that sufficiently challenge and extend children.
- Pupils' understanding of online safety, and their preparation for life in a multicultural society, is underdeveloped.

The school has the following strengths

- The newly appointed executive headteacher is accurately identifying priorities for improvement.
- Teachers and support staff feel invigorated and united by the recent changes, sharing the executive headteacher's vision for improvement and welcoming increased accountability.
- Where teaching is strongest, subject knowledge is secure and teachers' questioning skills are good.
- Disadvantaged pupils are well supported by the school. Gaps in core subjects between this group and others have reduced or closed completely.
- Pupils get on well together. They are happy, feel safe and have mutually respectful and positive relationships with adults.
- Pupils' attendance is good. They are eager to learn and come to school punctually each day.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen leadership and management, by:
 - ensuring that leadership roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and lines of accountability are understood by all
 - tightening the improvement planning processes and school-wide systems recently instigated, including the tracking and assessment of all groups of pupils including those with particular educational needs or specific talents
 - holding all subject leaders to account for the progress and achievement of pupils in all classes, within their areas of responsibility
 - using the recommendations of the external review of governance recently initiated, to more closely scrutinise the impact of improvement actions and challenge school leaders more rigorously on the gains being made.

- Improve teaching, learning and assessment to consistently good or better, by:
 - raising adults' expectations of what all groups of pupils and children in the early years can do and achieve, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics
 - affording all pupils more regular opportunities to read and write at length across the curriculum
 - delivering carefully tailored professional development training and opportunities to equip staff with the skills and understanding needed to improve their practice, with particular focus on securing excellent progress for able pupils
 - challenging pupils to reach the highest standards of which they are capable, instilling pride in the presentation of their work.

- Improve pupils' personal development and welfare, by:
 - ensuring that pupils develop a better understanding of how to keep safe online
 - deepening pupils' understanding of different faiths and cultures, and their understanding of life in a multicultural society.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management requires improvement

- Instability in leadership and management has only very recently been resolved with the appointment of an executive headteacher who now leads both Dr Thomlinson Middle School and Thropton First School. These significant changes have slowed the pace of school improvement but now offer a secure platform for moving forward.
- The executive headteacher and governors have quickly defined areas for priority improvement. They have put in place plans to secure the expertise of several experienced staff from Dr Thomlinson Middle School to support the work of Thropton First School. For example, the skilled special educational needs coordinator now works in both schools. This arrangement is newly established and therefore has yet to impact significantly on the progress of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs or the speed and accuracy with which these groups are identified.
- The executive headteacher has conducted performance management meetings with all staff. Roles and responsibilities have been clarified and staff feel motivated by the opportunities they have been afforded to develop leadership skills and improve their teaching practice. This has resulted in better joint working and increased professionalism among staff.
- The executive headteacher and governors are mindful that several parents have found the recent disruptions very unsettling. They understand that parents are keen to be more involved with the changes taking place and therefore the plans put in place by the executive headteacher to build positive partnerships through regular communication and meetings are a shared essential.
- Senior leaders have recently introduced a new system of assessment that defines the progress of pupils against National Curriculum requirements, but this is not yet fully embedded to measure the progress of all. Nevertheless, staff have already met with parents to introduce and explain the new reports that will be generated by the system. Parents who attended welcomed the information and feel better equipped to compare the progress of their children against others nationally.
- The school's curriculum requires further development in order to meet the needs of all groups of pupils. Whilst a broad and balanced range of topics are planned, some pupils are insufficiently challenged by the opportunities provided. Opportunities to access wide-ranging extra-curricular activities are limited – meaning pupils' interests and needs are not fully met. Pupils' knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures and faiths is naïve and less well developed than their spiritual, social and moral development.
- Leaders and governors make effective use of the extra money given by the government in support of disadvantaged pupils. Leaders go to great lengths to ensure that each disadvantaged individual is supported in a manner that best befits their needs or interests.
- Leaders have used the extra money given by the government to improve the quality, provision and outcomes for pupils in sport and physical education, effectively. Pupils have benefitted from regular specialist support to develop enhanced skills in a range of indoor and outdoor sports. Furthermore, pupils' participation in competitions with other schools has equipped them with transferable life-skills, such as resilience and sportsmanship, as well as an interest in the wider benefits of active health.
- **The governance of the school**
 - The governing body has recently been re-structured. In striving to improve, governors have been proactive in seeking an external review of their effectiveness. This process has been initiated by the local authority but has yet to be concluded, thereby key actions required to secure improved practice are not yet clearly defined.
 - The new Chair of the Governing Body holds high aspirations for children and for the school. She confidently and correctly identifies areas that require immediate improvement to secure better outcomes for pupils, recognising, for example, that some very able pupils in the school need greater challenge. This indicates an improving and better-informed picture of governance.
 - The Chair of the Governing Body is honest in her evaluation of the work of the governing body to date, as she suggests that it has not been as thorough as it should have been. Recent governing body minutes show that challenging questions are now being asked of leaders – securing improved accountability.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. A nominated governor has been put in place and has had safeguarding training – meaning leaders have up-to-date information and are better equipped to

manage their duties. All staff have been trained to manage their duties in light of the government's recommendations to prevent pupils from radicalisation and harm. Parents agree that pupils are safe and well-looked-after at the school.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- The quality of teaching is not consistently good. Teachers' expectations at times are too low and therefore they plan learning opportunities that make insufficient demands of pupils. This means that pupils fail to reach the standards that should be expected of them and pupils' expectations of themselves are not always high enough.
- Teachers do not always tackle pupils' misconceptions, challenge their thinking or amend poor practice. From low-level or inaccurate responses to questions, to an incorrect pencil or scissor hold, teachers' acceptance at times inhibits learning and progress. This leads to underdeveloped learning behaviours and poor practices becoming the norm, for some pupils.
- Teachers do not always ensure that pupils know precisely what to do to improve their work. Where next steps in learning are not communicated succinctly and effectively, pupils are unclear about how they could become even better readers, writers or mathematicians. In these instances, they are not empowered to challenge themselves or think more critically about their work, neither are they given enough opportunity to use and apply the things they learn.
- Presentation and pride in work is inconsistent. In the early years, for example, pupils are sometimes encouraged to 'make marks' even when they are capable of and interested in writing letters, words or sentences. Some poor quality and inaccurate work in symmetry in mathematics remains unchallenged. Low demands and expectations in these cases lead to low outcomes.
- Most able pupils are, too frequently, under challenged. For example, a fluent and able reader in Key Stage 2 was bored by the book she was reading in an English lesson; most-able pupils were inspired to start writing their own poem but had to wait until the lesson had been delivered to all, while some pupils in another class found the mathematics work too easy. This hampers ambition and achievement.
- Where teachers use appropriate technical terminology and subject-specific vocabulary effectively this is helping to equip pupils with the knowledge and understanding needed to make links with future learning.
- Adults use questioning successfully, at times, to encourage depth of thinking and to develop pupils' problem-solving skills. For example, Year 1 and 2 pupils were supported effectively to build up a bank of interesting phrases and vocabulary to use in creating their own fairy stories. Where this happens, pupils reach a deeper understanding of key concepts and develop the skills and perseverance required to write at length or tackle challenges.
- Teachers usually ensure that teaching assistants are well prepared for their role in lessons. A particular success recently has been the effective support given to help pupils improve their knowledge of the sounds that letters make. Because of this, pupils are quickly making up lost ground.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare requires improvement

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare requires improvement. Although pupils feel safe and are kept safe in school, not all pupils have a well-developed sense of how to keep themselves safe online. These pupils are ill-equipped to make informed choices in today's age of technology.
- Pupils are able to reflect on their own and others' lives and beliefs to varying extents. For example, several conveyed emotionally intelligent and empathetic responses to the recent flooding in Cumbria. However, the ability of pupils to speak knowledgably about other races and cultures is more limited. Although celebrations such as Eid and Hanukkah have recently been explored in some classes, pupils' appreciation of the similarities and differences between faiths and cultures is underdeveloped.
- Pupils show a strong connection to their own cultural heritage and are immensely proud and well-informed about their local environment. They have benefitted from trips and visits to local places of interest, for example Alnwick Gardens and the National Trust's Cragside, using these to shape their opinions and develop their understanding of the way history impacts on the present.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement. When tasks are not matched appropriately to pupils' needs or interests, concentration is sometimes lost. When this happens, pupils swing on their chairs, lean across tables or flit from task to task. On these occasions pupils do not achieve as well as they should.
- Pupils behave respectfully to adults and are usually respectful of one another. Pupils discussed some instances of poorer behaviour and rough play with the inspector; however, most pupils felt that these were dealt with promptly and fairly by the adults in school. All pupils agreed that adults listen to them and look after them well.
- Pupils are adamant that bullying does not happen in their school. They are able to discuss various ways in which people may be bullied and express a strong sense of distaste for bullying in any form. This said, pupils' understanding of racism and other deep-rooted animosities in society are immature and uninformed.
- Pupils enjoy coming to school every day and this is reflected in their good attendance and punctuality. No pupils are persistently absent. This signifies a shared understanding between home and school about the importance of good attendance to secure a positive future for pupils.

Outcomes for pupils

require improvement

- Teaching requires improvement and this is impacting on the consistency with which some pupils achieve and progress. A proportion of most-able pupils in each class and some children in the early years provision are therefore not always reaching the standards that should be expected of them.
- Some pupils are not effectively prepared for the next stage of their education. For example, standards in the early years recently fell below national expectations. This indicates that not all Reception pupils are being well equipped to meet the expectations of the Key Stage 1 curriculum, especially in terms of English and mathematics. This caps the success experienced by some pupils.
- The proportion of pupils attaining the higher standards expected nationally in reading, writing and mathematics remains too low, in both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Despite the recent introduction of regular challenge tasks to motivate this group and closer monitoring, progress is not yet sufficiently rapid.
- In Year 1, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the national phonics screening check, where pupils use their knowledge of the sounds letters make to read words and sentences, has recently improved to be above national standards. Pupils who are at risk of falling behind in terms of this reading skill are given valuable, extra support to ensure that they succeed and that these high standards are maintained.
- Disadvantaged pupils make good progress and reach or exceed standards similar to other pupils in the school. The gap with others nationally is narrowing across subjects. Newly established arrangements to support pupils with special educational needs show early promise but have yet to demonstrate long-term impact on improving outcomes for this group of pupils.

Early years provision

requires improvement

- Senior leaders have not fully communicated or defined clearly enough the role and responsibilities of the early years team of staff, meaning that lines of accountability in securing good progress for early years children remain too vague.
- Leaders have taken advice from the local authority's school improvement partner and early years' adviser to improve the early years environment meaning it is less cluttered and more engaging for children. The resources to support learning both indoors and outdoors are stimulating and of good quality. Learning intentions and expected outcomes, however, are either unclear or too unambitious to promote effective learning for all groups of children.
- External partners from the local authority have supported leaders to create an early years action plan to secure improvement. Nevertheless, measurable outcomes for individuals or groups of children are not clearly enough defined. For example, expectations for Nursery and Reception groups are not distinct and end of year goals for those children who enter the early years with above-typical skills in reading and writing are not explicit. Teachers therefore are less clear than they might be about how to plan for different ability groups.

- Children enter the early years displaying at least typical knowledge and skills for their age. Not all children, however, are reaching the higher levels of development that should be expected of them, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics. This means some children are ill-prepared for the Year 1 curriculum.
- Children are bright, full of enthusiasm and eager to learn but staff do not always capitalise on this. For example, several children enter the Reception class capably writing their name and forming legible letter shapes but adults do not build on these skills rapidly enough. Not all children thereby, are supported to progress at the rate of which they are capable.
- Governors have monitored the impact of recent improvement actions by leaders and the local authority within the early years' environment and have gathered first-hand evidence of how this is affecting teaching and learning. In this way, governors are equipping themselves with the information needed to hold leaders to account for the progress of early years children.
- Relationships between the early years staff and children are positive. Good links with parents mean that tears and upsets are rare. A warm, friendly atmosphere prevails and staff are committed to keeping children safe from harm.

School details

Unique reference number	122229
Local authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	10003815

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.

Type of school	First
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	3–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	57
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Sue Bolam
Executive Headteacher	Mr Liam Murtagh
Telephone number	01669 620297
Website	www.thropton.northumberland.sch.uk
Email address	admin@thropton.northumberland.gov.uk
Date of previous inspection	21–22 March 2011

Information about this school

- Thropton First School is a small school serving a fairly rural environment.
- The proportion of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is average.
- Most pupils are of White British heritage and there are very few pupils for whom English is an additional language.
- There were no pupils with a statement of special educational needs at the time of inspection; however, the proportion of pupils receiving support for special educational needs or disabilities was significantly higher than national averages.
- The early years' provision caters for nursery and reception-aged pupils.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed the quality of teaching and learning in all classes on both days of the inspection. Three lessons were jointly observed with the executive headteacher. The standard of work in pupils' books was looked at as well as the quality of pupils' work in displays around school.
- The inspector visited an assembly, talked with pupils during breaktimes and lunch, listened to a number of pupils reading and held discussions with different groups of children, including the pupil council.
- Discussions were also held with groups of parents at the beginning and end of the school day, and the inspector took account of letters and emails written by parents. Twenty-one responses from the online questionnaire (Parent View) were also considered.
- Meetings and telephone conversations were held with local authority representatives and a group of governors. Senior leaders met with the inspector to discuss their work, including the recently appointed special educational needs coordinator, the leader of the early years, the modern foreign languages leader and the assessment coordinator.
- Three subject leaders conducted an evaluation of pupils' work with the inspector.
- A wide range of the school's own information and documents were examined, including the school's self-evaluation, the school development plan and records of the checks made on the quality of teaching and learning.
- Information about safeguarding and the work of the governing body was also evaluated, including minutes of meetings and policy documentation ratified.

Inspection team

Fiona Manuel, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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