

Blackthorn Primary School

Waingrove, Blackthorn, Northampton NN3 8EP

Inspection dates

22–23 June 2016

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an inadequate school

- Leaders have not taken appropriate action in response to safeguarding concerns. They have not ensured that those with responsibility for safeguarding have received the support they need to carry out their roles effectively.
- The school continues to be affected by leadership and staffing changes. This limits its ability, currently, to make rapid progress.
- The school's middle leaders do not all have the skills to hold teachers to account in the areas they lead.
- Outcomes for pupils remain well below national expectations. The majority of pupils in Year 6 will leave the school without the knowledge and understanding to do well at secondary school.
- Pupils' behaviour, while improving, is not yet good. Low-level disruption continues to disrupt learning in some lessons.
- The teaching of spelling, grammar and punctuation is not consistently effective across the school. As a result, pupils do not develop their writing skills sufficiently well.
- Not all teachers have high enough expectations of what pupils can achieve, or how they should behave. They do not consistently ensure that the most able pupils are challenged by the work they are set.
- Teaching does not always motivate and inspire pupils, especially boys, to do their best. Not all teachers give feedback in line with the school's policy.
- The early years requires improvement. There are encouraging signs of improving teaching, and outcomes for children show significant improvement. However, further progress is held back by capacity issues in leadership.

The school has the following strengths

- Since her appointment in September 2015, the principal has brought about many improvements. She has successfully set a new direction for the school.
- Leaders from the trust are now providing an appropriate package of support that has led to improvements to leadership and teaching.
- In some classes, pupils learn well as a result of high expectations and carefully targeted teaching.
- Pupils are responding well to the school's new values. They feel an increasing sense of pride in their school, and are keen to play their part in improving it.

Full report

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and rapidly accelerate outcomes for pupils, by:
 - ensuring that the teaching of spelling, grammar and punctuation is consistently effective in all classes and across a range of subjects
 - giving the most able pupils tasks that are appropriate to their ability, and using questioning effectively to challenge these pupils' understanding in class
 - ensuring that all teachers have consistently high expectations for pupils' behaviour and for what pupils are able to do
 - developing teaching strategies that capture pupils' imagination and inspire them to do their best, especially for boys
 - ensuring that teachers consistently apply the school's marking policy so that pupils receive effective feedback on their work.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, by:
 - ensuring that there is a consistently robust response to all safeguarding concerns
 - improving pupils' engagement in lessons so that low-level disruption continues to reduce.
- Improve leadership and management, by:
 - reviewing roles and responsibilities to ensure that the school increases its capacity to secure further improvement
 - ensuring that leaders with safeguarding responsibilities receive sufficient support to carry out their roles effectively
 - developing the skills of middle leaders so they are able to hold others to account for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the areas they lead
 - increasing opportunities for teachers to learn from the best practice within the school and the trust, in order to improve their practice
 - maintaining the current level of support from the trust and building relationships with effective leaders from other trust schools, so that new leaders are helped to develop the skills they need to carry out their roles effectively.
- Improve the early years, by:
 - ensuring that there are more opportunities for children to develop their imaginative skills
 - increasing opportunities for parents to engage with their child's learning.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is inadequate

- Leaders have not ensured that safeguarding is effective. They have not responded appropriately to serious safeguarding concerns.
- Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding have too many other responsibilities. This limits their ability to ensure that all issues are dealt with effectively.
- The school continues to be affected by changes to leadership and staffing. While the school will be fully staffed in the new school year, this turbulence has affected the progress that the school has been able to make and its capacity, in the short term, to secure further improvements. Currently, too much relies on the skills of a few key leaders.
- The school's sponsor, the Education Fellowship Trust, did not secure good leadership for the school quickly enough. This meant that the school was not able to make the rapid progress necessary to bring about the removal of special measures.
- Middle leaders do not yet have the skills to drive the necessary improvement. While they have had some involvement in monitoring and quality assurance, this is not directly linked to improving teaching. They do not have a secure understanding of their roles in holding others to account for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Despite these weaknesses, the current leadership has notable strengths. The school is now led by a highly competent principal with a track record of school improvement in another trust school. She is skilled and resilient, and has already brought about many improvements. Since her appointment, she has successfully set a new direction for the school.
- The values that now inform the school's work are uniting the school community around a common purpose. Pupils have a clear understanding of what it means to do things 'the Blackthorn way'. Crucially, they have a better sense of their own worth, and feel motivated to be part of the school's success.
- The trust has wisely decided to continue with an intensive package of support to enable new leaders to settle into their roles. They have recognised the need to prioritise safeguarding and have now provided intensive additional support for this area. Rightly, they recognise that the school needs to develop the capacity to improve from within, and have put in place appropriate plans to allow the school gradually to rely less on the crutch of ongoing external support.
- Despite the ongoing upheaval, teaching is improving. Leaders from the trust have worked intensively with individual teachers to develop their practice. Through a process of ongoing observation and coaching, they have focused on the precise areas that teachers needed to work on. Teachers who have benefited from this support are now in a position to support others.
- Leaders have ensured that the additional funding provided to support disadvantaged pupils is spent wisely. This is leading to improved achievement for eligible pupils, because leaders carefully monitor the impact of the spending and make the necessary adjustments.
- The use of the sports premium is a particular success story. For the first time in many years, pupils are taking part in sports competitions against other schools. While they are not yet taking home any trophies, the chance to get fit and take part has developed much-needed team spirit and raised the profile of the school in the community. Pupils are particularly proud of their nomination for the 'most improved sports school' award.
- The new curriculum has created more opportunities for pupils to practise their writing and numeracy skills in a range of other subjects. It is in the early stages of implementation, and teaching of these skills is not consistently effective. The delivery of the curriculum sometimes fails to capture pupils' imagination or inspire them to do their best.
- The promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural learning is developing well, chiefly through the school's new values, but also through extra-curricular activities, and increased opportunities to learn about a range of faiths and cultures. During the inspection, older pupils in particular were enjoying learning about and discussing the referendum on whether to leave the European Union. There are increased opportunities for pupils to learn about and practise democracy, for example through the school's forum.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Governors are now playing a more effective role in holding leaders to account for the rate of improvement. Governance has undergone changes, but is now in a more stable position.

- Governors have provided a useful and helpful perspective to the school on safeguarding. The governor with responsibility for this area has undertaken a thorough scrutiny of the school's policies and practices, and has made many helpful suggestions to improve how well the school communicates safeguarding issues to parents.
- Through their regular reports to trust leaders, governors ensure that the trust is kept well-informed about the school's progress.
- Governors have worked with leaders to ensure that performance management arrangements are now more robust.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective. Leaders have put in place improved processes and procedures to report and record safeguarding concerns. They have led valuable training with staff on the importance of making careful and detailed notes when concerns have arisen. This has been effective in ensuring that staff now report even minor concerns and have much greater awareness of the risks to which pupils in the community are potentially vulnerable. However, those responsible for safeguarding have not always followed their own protocols. Records of conversations with parents and of the ongoing monitoring of pupils are incomplete or missing. Leaders have not always responded appropriately to serious safeguarding concerns, putting pupils at unnecessary risk. They have focused too much on process and have not always prioritised pupils' needs. The designated lead for safeguarding has too many other responsibilities to carry out her role effectively. The school has a high and complex caseload of safeguarding issues, but safeguarding leads have not received the necessary support and supervision to cope well with this work. Leaders are not ensuring that parents engage well with help offered early on, before issues escalate into more serious concerns.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- Not all teachers have high enough expectations for what pupils can achieve, or how they should behave.
- The teaching of spelling, grammar and punctuation is not consistently effective. As a result, pupils are not developing the skills they need to write well quickly enough.
- Much of the teaching necessarily focuses on ensuring that pupils have mastered basic skills. However, this means that teachers do not routinely make the most of opportunities to stretch the most able pupils with more challenging work.
- Not all teachers give pupils feedback in line with the school's marking policy. Pupils are not always clear about how to improve their work.
- Some teachers do not address instances of low-level disruption effectively. Sometimes, they raise their own voices above the background din. The result is that learning environments are not always as calm as they should be.
- Not all teachers are confident in using creative and imaginative approaches to inspire and motivate pupils. This is especially true for boys in key stage 2. As a result, these pupils sometimes lose interest in their work.
- Where learning is most effective, it is because teaching is very carefully targeted to pupils' needs and enables them to move on quickly. This is most evident in the early years, key stage 1 and Year 6.
- Teachers are successfully embedding a culture of reading across the school. Leaders have introduced a more structured approach to the teaching of phonics, with the result that pupils are now developing much improved reading skills. In all classes, pupils are becoming more confident readers. They enjoy reading and talking about their reading preferences.
- Pupils who speak English as an additional language receive effective support in class, and this contributes to the rapid progress that they make. Teachers and teaching assistants work together effectively to help these pupils develop the language skills they need to fully access the curriculum.
- In some classes, teachers use effective strategies to capture pupils' imagination and excite their interest. For example, in a Year 4 class, pupils practised using compass points to navigate their 'rockets' through a space maze. Their enjoyment of the task was evident in how well they supported each other to successfully reach the end point.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is inadequate

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is inadequate. Leaders have not ensured that pupils' welfare is promoted through a consistently robust response to safeguarding concerns.
- Risk assessments for pupils who present particularly challenging behaviour do not give staff clear enough guidance on what to do in different situations.
- Anti-bullying ambassadors work well with teachers and support staff to address bullying in the school and most pupils who spoke with inspectors are confident that bullying is reducing. Some pupils and their parents continue to be concerned about bullying in the school, however.
- There are some positive signs of improving personal development. Pupils' physical development is improving as a result of improved sporting opportunities. Pupils told inspectors how much they enjoy taking part in sport, getting fit and letting off steam.
- Pupils who face particular difficulties and challenges receive effective support. The school works well with a range of partners to improve pupils' personal development and welfare. This includes play therapists and behaviour specialists.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- Some learning is still affected by poor behaviour. This is particularly the case in classes that have not had stable teaching.
- The school's new behaviour policy is proving effective in improving pupils' behaviour and motivating them to want to do better. Pupils told inspectors that behaviour and manners are improving.
- The establishment of common values, 'the Blackthorn way', has meant that all members of the school community now have a clearer understanding of what the school is all about. The rewards in place for demonstrating these values have contributed to improved behaviour. Pupils are eager to earn 'gems' and understand their role in improving the school. As one said, 'I want to be a good ambassador for my school.'
- Attendance is rising and is now in line with the national average. The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from school is falling.
- The school is well on the way to becoming a more harmonious, cohesive community. Inspectors saw a lovely example of this at lunchtime, when pupils spontaneously broke into a 'flash mob' dance routine. This brought pupils of different backgrounds and ages together to develop and practise their dance skills, while others looked on and cheered.

Outcomes for pupils are inadequate

- Pupils begin at the school with skills that are well below those typically seen. A long legacy of poor teaching, coupled with low expectations, has meant that pupils have not made sufficient progress from these low starting points and have continued to underachieve as they move through the school.
- In almost all classes, pupils' skills in reading, writing and mathematics are well below national expectations. While there is evidence in some classes of pupils now making better progress, the majority of pupils in Year 6 will leave the school without the knowledge and understanding to do well at secondary school. Their writing skills are particularly weak.
- Pupils' understanding of grammar, punctuation and spelling across a range of classes is not secure. Many pupils struggle with the basics of sentence structure and tense, and are not able to use punctuation correctly.
- Progress across different classes is uneven. This is especially the case where staffing has been turbulent. In Years 2 and 4 in particular, pupils are making insufficient progress.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are not making adequate progress. Although leaders have improved the ways in which they identify and support these pupils, this is not having a consistent impact on the progress that they are making. In some classes they are falling further behind their peers.
- In some classes, disadvantaged pupils are keeping pace with their peers and in some they have made accelerated progress and overtaken them. Leaders readily acknowledge, however, that there is more to do to accelerate the progress that all pupils make.

- Pupils who begin at the school with little or no English make rapid progress. Effective teaching of reading skills enables these pupils to acquire language quickly.
- There are promising signs of outcomes now beginning to improve, particularly for the youngest pupils. In the early years, the proportion that have the skills ready to move on to the next stage of their education has risen significantly.
- The effective teaching of phonics has meant that pupils are developing much-improved reading skills. Information provided by leaders suggests that the proportion that will pass the phonics test in Year 1 is likely to be in line with the national average this year, while the proportion that pass the re-test in Year 2 is likely to be above the national average. These are significant improvements from the previous year.

Early years provision

requires improvement

- Currently, the early years is led by the school's principal who has an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision. However, although she has had a positive impact, the principal has too many other responsibilities to be able to make all the improvements to the early years that are needed. A new leader of this area takes up post in September.
- There are too few opportunities for children to develop their imaginative skills. As a result, they make less progress in this area of the curriculum than in others.
- Not all parents contribute to children's learning journeys or fully understand the importance of these. This limits the progress that some children are able to make.
- Children in the early years learn well as a result of effective teaching and carefully targeted interventions. Teachers and other adults provide a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment. As a result, children are well motivated and engaged in their learning.
- Teachers and other adults make the most of opportunities to model language effectively. Children, including those with English as an additional language, are helped to develop good communication skills as a result.
- Children are helped to develop the reading skills that they need to move on to Year 1 because the teaching of reading is well structured to meet their needs.
- Children behave well. They listen carefully to adults' explanations and follow their instructions with little prompting. They understand the importance of treating each other kindly.
- Outcomes in the early years show a steady upward trend of improvement. This year, the proportion of children who will achieve a good level of development has risen significantly to be in line with the national average. This represents good progress from children's low starting points.
- Children who speak English as an additional language make rapid progress because they receive effective support and quickly develop the language skills they need to do well.
- Teachers make good use of the outdoor area. Pupils' physical development is an area of strength.

School details

Unique reference number	138984
Local authority	Northamptonshire
Inspection number	10011653

This inspection 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	407
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Rachel Mallows
Principal	Michelle Ginn
Telephone number	01604 407254
Website	www.blackthornprimary.net
Email address	info@blackthornprimary.net
Date of previous inspection	1 July 2014

Information about this school

- Blackthorn Primary is a larger than average-sized school.
- The academy was established in December 2012. It is sponsored by The Education Fellowship Trust.
- The majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds. The proportions from minority ethnic groups and those who speak English as an additional language are above average.
- The proportion of pupils who are supported by the pupil premium, which is additional funding for disadvantaged pupils, is above average.
- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disability is above average.
- The academy does not meet the government's current floor standards, which are the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress in reading, writing and mathematics.
- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning in all classes in the school. Some lessons were observed jointly with school leaders.
- Meetings were held with the principal, senior and middle leaders, three representatives from the trust, including the chief executive, and two members of the academy advisory board, including the chair.
- Inspectors considered a range of documentation, including performance information for all classes, the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans, records relating to behaviour, bullying, attendance and safeguarding and school policy documents.
- Inspectors observed behaviour around the school, including at break and lunchtimes. They spoke formally with three groups of pupils, and informally with others around school. One inspector listened to pupils reading.
- There were too few responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, for inspectors to view. A recent parental survey carried out by school leaders was considered, as was a pupil questionnaire.

Inspection team

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