

INSPECTION REPORT

LINSLADE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Leighton Buzzard

LEA area: Bedfordshire

Unique reference number: 109668

Headteacher: Mr Jeff Hooper

Reporting inspector: Mrs J M Brookes
21416

Dates of inspection: 16-19 October 2000

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Type of school:	Middle deemed Secondary
School category:	Community
Age range of pupils:	9 to 13
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
School address:	Mentmore Road Leighton Buzzard Bedfordshire
Postcode:	LU7 7PA
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Appropriate authority:	Governing body
Name of chair of governors:	Dr David Roberts
Date of previous inspection:	July 1995

INFORMATION ABOUT THE INSPECTION TEAM

Team members		Subject responsibilities	Aspect responsibilities
J M Brookes	Registered inspector	Equality of opportunity	What sort of school is it; how well the school is led and managed; what the school should do to improve further.
D Binfield	Lay inspector		Pupils' attitudes, values and personal development; how well the school cares for its pupils; how well the school works in partnership with parents.
B Barratt	Team inspector	History	The school's results and achievements; how well pupils are taught.
J Marshall	Team inspector	Modern Foreign Languages (French)	How well are the curriculum and other opportunities offered to pupils
R Hobson	Team inspector	English	
R Shaw	Team inspector	Mathematics	
A Fraser	Team inspector	Science	
R Humphries	Team inspector	Design and technology; Information and communications technology	
H Feasey	Team inspector	Geography	
J Bowden	Team inspector	Physical Education; Special educational needs	
T McIntosh	Team inspector	Music	
J Simms	Team inspector	Art	

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Inspection Quality Division
The Office for Standards in Education
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PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Linslade Middle School is a popular, large mixed school for pupils aged 9-13 years. There are 649 pupils on roll. All year groups except Year 6 contain more boys than girls. The social circumstances of the pupils are above average and while the proportion of pupils from other ethnic backgrounds is high at 15.8 per cent, the percentage of pupils in the school speaking English as a second language is very low. Although the intake of the school contains a comprehensive range of ability it is above the national average overall. The proportion of pupils identified as having special educational needs is broadly in line with the national average but the proportion with statements of special educational needs, 1.7 per cent, is well below the national average.

HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS

This is an effective school. Pupils achieve standards above those expected of pupils of their age by the time they leave school as a result of much good teaching and their own very positive attitudes to learning. The high quality of leadership of the headteacher, good management throughout the school and very strong commitment of the staff to raise standards has brought about a good level of improvement since the last inspection. The school's capacity to raise standards further is good. The school makes effective use of its financial resources, experienced staff and satisfactory range of learning resources. Overall the school provides good value for money.

What the school does well

- pupils make good progress and achieve well, attaining above average standards
- much good teaching challenges pupils to solve problems and show initiative in their learning: very good implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategies
- very good care and support is provided for pupils and excellent systems for monitoring attendance
- pupils' personal development is very good, particularly their moral and social development
- pupils' attitudes to work and to the school are very positive, as are relationships
- provision of extra-curricular activities, both sporting and cultural, is very good
- there is very good leadership from the headteacher; a good steer from the senior management team and good support from middle managers
- within the school there is a very good ethos and the school's aims are very strongly reflected in its work
- very strong commitment to improvement is apparent with appropriate targets and a good capacity to succeed
- very committed and experienced staff are very well supported in their professional development

What could be improved

- teaching of French
- arrangements for supervision during lunchtime
- the role of the head of subject in monitoring and ensuring consistency in the quality of teaching
- curriculum provision for history and geography at Key Stage 2, information and communications technology (ICT) at Key Stage 3 and opportunities for spiritual and multicultural development at both key stages
- consideration of issues of equality of opportunity
- effectiveness of communication with parents
- leadership from the governing body

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the governors' action plan.

HOW THE SCHOOL HAS IMPROVED SINCE ITS LAST INSPECTION

The school was last inspected in July 1995. The level of improvement since then has been good. Standards of attainment have improved over the last three years. The quality of teaching has also improved. Lessons have clear objectives and are well-planned to meet the different needs and prior attainment of pupils. Progress in implementing the key issues for action identified in 1995 has been good. The headteacher has brought about improvements in school management including better co-ordination of the curriculum, more effective use of the skills of staff and more systematic evaluation of the quality of education. Daily assemblies have been restored. All health and safety issues have been addressed. The effectiveness of spending is now given due consideration.

STANDARDS

The table shows the standards achieved by 11 year olds based on National Curriculum test results.

Performance in:	compared with			
	all schools			similar schools
	1997	1998	1999	1999
End of Key Stage 2 tests	B	C	A	B

Key	
well above average	A
above average	B
below average	C
well below average	D
	E

The improvement in standards at the end of Key Stage 2 from 1997 to 1999 was broadly in line with the trend nationally, but the rate of improvement from 1998 to 2000 was much greater. In 1999, the results of the National Curriculum tests in English, mathematics and science were well above the national average for pupils of the same age. When compared with the standards in schools with a similar proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, the results in English and science were above the average and in mathematics they matched the average. The results in 2000 showed an improvement in all three subjects and especially in mathematics. In 1999 there was no significant difference in the attainment of boys and girls but in 2000 boys performed better than girls which is the reverse of national trends. Inspection observation confirms that pupils' attainment by the end of Key Stage 2 is above that expected for their age. In English and science they attain standards well above the national average and in mathematics standards that are above. In all other subjects the levels reached are above those expected apart from in ICT and history where standards are in line with expectations. At the end of Year 8 pupils' attainment is above the standards expected of pupils of their age. In English and science standards are well above those expected for pupils of a similar age and in mathematics they are above average. This is shown both in the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority tests and the work of pupils seen during the inspection. Standards in most other subjects are above expectations except in design and technology, ICT, physical education and French where they are in line. In religious education at both key stages pupils attain standards well above the expectations of the Agreed Syllabus. Pupils achieve well at both key stages in relation to their prior attainment. The targets set by the school for further improvement in standards are appropriately challenging.

PUPILS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	Pupils show very keen interest and concentrate very well and this contributes well to achieving high standards of attainment.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	Very good in nearly all lessons. A small minority of pupils cause problems outside classrooms, particularly during the lunchbreak.
Personal development and relationships	Relationships are consistently very good. Personal development is helped considerably by a full programme including educational visits and the extra-curricular activities.
Attendance	Very good with a very low incidence of unauthorised absence.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of pupils:	aged 9-11 years	aged 11-13 years
Lessons seen overall	Good	Good

Inspectors make judgements about teaching in the range: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; unsatisfactory; poor; very poor. 'Satisfactory' means that the teaching is adequate and strengths outweigh weaknesses.

Teaching is good. In the lessons seen during the inspection 76 per cent of the teaching was good or better: of this, 26 per cent was very good and a further three per cent was excellent. All of the rest was satisfactory apart from 6 per cent which was unsatisfactory. Teaching is of consistently good quality overall across both key stages but some features, teachers' subject expertise, marking and assessment, and the use made of homework are stronger at Key Stage 3 than Key Stage 2. This is the case in history, geography and French. Teaching observed was very good in science and good in mathematics at both key stages. In English it was very good at Key Stage 2 and good at Key Stage 3. It was good at both key stages in art, design and technology and religious education. Teaching in music is very good throughout the school. In history and geography teaching was satisfactory at Key Stage 2 and good at Key Stage 3: it was unsatisfactory in French at Key Stage 2 where it does not have to be taught, but satisfactory at Key Stage 3. A small amount of unsatisfactory teaching was also seen in mathematics and geography. The skills of literacy and numeracy are taught very well. The needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs, are well met by work being suitably matched to their learning requirements. Pupils' learning is good at both key stages. They make good progress overall in acquiring knowledge, understanding and skills and in developing high levels of interest, concentration and independence as learners, especially at Key Stage 3.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum	Good curriculum at both key stages although a lack of time for history and geography in Key Stage 2 has an adverse effect on standards for some pupils. Similarly, the teaching of ICT through other subjects in Key Stage 3 is underdeveloped. Very good provision for extra-curricular activities. Excellent links have been established with partner schools. In Key Stage 2, in particular, the quality of pupils' curriculum experience depends to some extent on their access to specialist teaching and accommodation.
Provision for pupils with special educational needs	Good. Pupils therefore achieve well and make good progress in the majority of lessons.
Provision for pupils' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	Provision for moral and social education is very good. Pupils' cultural development is good and spiritual development is satisfactory. Insufficient thought is given to spiritual development in most subjects of the curriculum.
How well the school cares for its pupils	Pupils are provided with a very high standard of pastoral care. Health and welfare provision is generally effective although an improvement is needed in the lunchtime arrangements.
Partnership with parents	Parents give a high level of support to learning. Very good information is provided about pupils' progress and school events. Personal communication with parents is an area for improvement.

HOW WELL THE SCHOOL IS LED AND MANAGED

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff	Very good leadership from the headteacher and effective support from the senior management team make a good contribution to efficient management and the smooth running of the school. Good leadership by heads of subject and heads of year is reflected in high quality of care and continuously improving standards.
How well the governors fulfil their responsibilities	Governors have a satisfactory understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and individuals make an active contribution to school management but the governing body does not yet play a full part in the school's development. All statutory requirements are met.
The school's evaluation of its performance	Monitoring and evaluation are used well by the senior management team to identify strengths and weaknesses. Much recent work on the analysis of test and examination results has enabled the school to raise standards further. Monitoring by middle managers is inconsistent, partly due to a lack of time.
The strategic use of resources	The staff are experienced and are satisfactorily deployed. Resources are used well to support the school's development. Accommodation is satisfactory overall though accommodation for music is unsatisfactory and some other lessons are taught in non-specialist rooms. There is close monitoring of the effectiveness of spending and finances are well controlled and administered. Principles of best value are applied satisfactorily. The school provides good value for money.

PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What parents would like to see improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The standards pupils achieve.• The enthusiasm and hard work of pupils.• The quality of teaching.• Good behaviour and attendance.• The happy and caring environment.• The school is well led.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communications with parents.• More consistency with homework.• Behaviour of a small minority of pupils.• Lunchtime arrangements.

Inspectors support the positive views of parents and the concerns about behaviour and lunchtime arrangements. Whilst there are very good aspects of communication with parents the school could do more to ensure that all parents are comfortable in approaching the school management. Homework is set at appropriate times to support learning.

PART B: COMMENTARY

HOW HIGH ARE STANDARDS?

The school's results and achievements

1. The standards reached by pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 have improved steadily over the last four years with a very marked improvement during the last two years. In 1999 the standards reached in the National Curriculum tests in English, mathematics and science were well above the average for pupils of a similar age in all maintained schools, and above those of schools with a similar proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in English and science and in line with the average in mathematics. The 2000 results were higher in all three subjects. The improvement in mathematics was especially significant bringing standards to above the 1999 average for similar schools. In 1999 there was no significant difference in the attainment of boys and girls but in 2000 boys did better than girls thus reversing the national trend. Inspection observation confirms that pupils' attainment by the end of Key Stage 2 is above that expected for their age. In English and science they attain standards well above the national average and in mathematics standards that are above. In all other subjects the levels reached are above those expected apart from in ICT and history where standards are in line with expectations. The school sets appropriately challenging targets for attainment at the end of Key Stage 2.

2. The results of the Key Stage 3 Qualification and Curriculum Authority tests in 1999 were above average and reflect the standards of the pupils' work seen during the inspection. Towards the end of Key Stage 3 pupils in Year 8 continue to achieve standards which are well above the standards expected at this point of the key stage in English and science and in mathematics standards that are above average. Standards in most other subjects are above expectations except in design and technology, ICT, physical education and French where they are in line. In religious education at both key stages pupils attain standards well above the expectations of the Agreed Syllabus.

3. Standards in literacy are well above average across the curriculum. All pupils listen well and most express themselves confidently using a wide range of vocabulary. Higher attaining pupils speak fluently in a range of contexts. Higher attaining pupils write both formally and informally and they choose vocabulary precisely. Lower attaining pupils write simple sentences accurately using a reasonably wide range of vocabulary. Literacy skills are used well across the curriculum. In science, for instance, pupils have an extensive scientific vocabulary which they use to produce appropriate accounts of their work.

4. Standards in numeracy are above average. The pupils' competence and confidence when using the skills of mental arithmetic are distinctive features of the school; this stems from the emphasis that teachers rightly place on these basic skills and their firm insistence that calculators are used with discrimination. The skills of mathematics are drawn upon to support learning in other subjects and notably so in history, geography, science and design and technology. The satisfactory application of these skills reflects the steps that the school has taken to promote numeracy across the curriculum.

5. Pupils' achievement is good at both Key Stages 2 and 3. At Key Stage 2, pupils make good progress in raising their attainment from average on entry to above average, or in subjects such as English and science from above average to well above by the end of the key stage. By the end of Year 8, they have considerably broadened their experiences. Good progress is made at both key stages in the development of knowledge, understanding and skills across the curriculum. Pupils achieve particularly well in science and music. Pupils achieve very well from the outset in science because of the very good arrangements for their transition from their work at the earlier stage of Key Stage 1 in their lower schools. Their achievement continues to be well supported by very good teaching, which includes appropriately high expectations and challenge to pupils to work responsibly and to think for themselves. In music similarly, pupils learn very well because very good teaching ensures that they build systematically on their previous knowledge and understanding and offers appropriate challenge and that they learn wherever possible through practical experience. Careful target-setting helps them to make further progress.

6. Pupils, including those who are gifted and talented, achieve well at both key stages in English, ICT, religious education and art, helped by the good teaching and by their own high levels of interest and motivation which are key factors in supporting their progress in all subjects. In history, geography and French, achievement is better at Key Stage 3 than Key Stage 2. Pupils' achievement in history and the achievement of lower attainers in geography is restricted at Key Stage 2 by the limited amount of time allocated for the subjects and in French by some unsatisfactory aspects of teaching. Achievement at both key stages is also hindered at times by inaccuracies in teachers' assessments of pupils' attainment. Teachers are over-cautious in their assessments particularly in relation to the work of the ablest pupils. Consequently, assessments often under-estimate actual attainment and therefore are not a secure basis for ensuring that pupils are set appropriately challenging work.

7. Pupils with special educational needs also achieve well in all subjects at both key stages. They make good progress especially in music and in science, where they are very well integrated with their others in their class. In English and religious education they make good progress partly as a result of teachers carefully matching the work to their needs and capabilities and partly because of the very positive attitudes of other pupils towards them. They sometimes need more help with written work in order to gain maximum benefit from practical sessions. They also progress well in mathematics especially when benefiting from additional adult support in the classroom.

Pupils' attitudes, values and personal development

8. Pupils' attitudes to learning are very good and this contributes significantly to the high standards of achievement. They show an enthusiastic approach and work hard. Nearly all pupils listen attentively, join in discussions and undertake written and practical tasks in a conscientious manner. Very occasionally interest wanes during the few lessons when pupils are not sufficiently challenged. However, the overall picture is one of pupils enjoying lessons, contributing well to the positive learning atmosphere and taking pride in their work.

9. Behaviour is good. High standards are seen in nearly all lessons. This reflects the clear expectations of teachers and the ready co-operation of nearly all pupils. Only isolated instances of misbehaviour were observed during a very small number of lessons. For instance, some boys caused disruption during a Year 8 gymnastics lesson. Some behaviour problems do arise during lunch breaks and sometimes when pupils are moving around the school. The incidence of verbal abuse and physical bullying is reported to be fairly low and mainly involves pupils in the older age groups. There were no permanent exclusions last year. The seven fixed period exclusions compare with none at the time of the last inspection.

10. Relationships throughout the school are very good. Teachers and other staff create a friendly and co-operative atmosphere. Pupils are quick to help others and polite to visitors. They show respect for one another and collaborate well when working together in small groups. Pupils with special educational needs are fully integrated and accepted by all pupils. They are confident in asking for help when they feel they need to and appreciate it. Pupils' very good personal development is helped by a full programme of educational visits, including a Year 6 residential stay on the Isle of Wight. They develop personal interests and skills by taking part in the many extra-curricular clubs, which cover a range of sporting, cultural and other activities. Pupils show initiative, work independently and take on responsibilities very willingly and often without prompting. This is reflected in the high level of self-confidence with which they undertake studies and play a full part in the life of the school.

11. Attendance is very good. In the last two years the attendance level has been 95.7 per cent, which is well above the national average. In 1999/2000, unauthorised absence was 0.1 per cent. This is well below the average for middle schools and represents an improvement over the previous year. Pupils arrive punctually and a prompt start is made to lessons throughout the day. All these factors have a positive influence on pupils' learning.

HOW WELL ARE PUPILS OR STUDENTS TAUGHT?

12. Teaching is good. In the lessons seen during the inspection it was good or better in 76 per cent of lessons and this included 26 per cent which was very good and three per cent which was excellent. Six per cent of teaching was judged to be unsatisfactory. Overall practice is consistently strong at both key stages but some aspects and notably teachers' subject knowledge, and the marking and assessment of pupils' progress, are stronger at Key Stage 3 than at Key Stage 2. There has been a significant improvement in the quality of teaching since the last inspection, especially in the amount of good or better teaching.

13. Teaching observed was very good in science and good in mathematics at both key stages. In English it was very good at Key Stage 2 and good at Key Stage 3. Teaching in music was very good throughout the school. It was good at both key stages in art, design and technology and religious education. In history and geography teaching was satisfactory at Key Stage 2 and good at Key Stage 3: it was unsatisfactory in French at Key Stage 2 where it does not have to be taught, but satisfactory at Key Stage 3. A small amount of unsatisfactory teaching was also seen in mathematics and geography. On the other hand 60 per cent of the teaching in both these subjects was good or better.

14. Pupils learn well at both key stages. Their learning, especially at Key Stage 3, is strongly promoted when the teachers' good subject expertise is used effectively to enable them to gain knowledge, understanding and skills. The need for teachers to teach outside their subject specialism, mostly at Key Stage 2, sometimes restricts their ability to challenge pupils sufficiently or, as in history, to help pupils to develop appropriate subject skills. Progress in French at Key Stage 2 is hindered when pupils are taught pronunciation, vocabulary and structures which are incorrect. However, in most subjects, as in mathematics, any shortcomings arising from insufficiently strong subject expertise are usually offset by thorough lesson planning and effective teaching strategies.

15. Detailed lesson planning ensures appropriate challenge, pace and range of learning in the great majority of lessons. In many subjects, lively and imaginative methods capture pupils' interests and challenge them very effectively. This is illustrated well by much of the teaching in religious education and also in science. In one Year 7 lesson in science, for instance, the pupils were challenged and their interest sustained throughout the lesson by the teacher playing the role of a clumsy professor and presenting them with a scientific dilemma. Such strategies are highly effective in enabling pupils to think for themselves and to work at full stretch with great interest and enjoyment. Consistently high realistic challenge and on-going stimulus both within and outside of lessons are the major reasons for the teaching being of such high quality in music.

16. Pupils respond very well to challenge. Many are avid learners. Their high levels of motivation and interest in their work are major factors in promoting learning of a high quality. This was shown very well in a lesson in English when in a Year 6 lesson on Roald Dahl's *Boy*, pupils were working in groups, and they organised themselves and took the initiative in moving the discussion on with impressive maturity. Higher attaining pupils especially show considerable initiative in their learning even when the opportunities for them to do so in lessons are limited. Many wait patiently during over long introductions to lessons waiting to get on with their work. On the other hand they can become bored, restless and inattentive in these circumstances, and as a consequence their learning is significantly slower. For example, in a Year 8 history lesson on the North American Indians much of the time the pupils worked well sustained by their own interest in the topic, but eventually lost interest because too little was asked of them in exploring issues for themselves.

17. However, in many lessons in history and in most other subjects there are good opportunities for pupils to learn in depth with effective use being made of a range of strategies for this purpose including skilful questioning and group work to enable pupils to develop and refine their thinking and understanding. In a Year 6 English lesson, for instance, the teacher used national literacy strategy techniques effectively in order to stretch and challenge pupils. She questioned pupils closely to check what they had understood and enabled them to work in different groups on activities which were well matched to their attainment levels. These strategies all contributed to pupils making good progress in understanding the text and in improving their literacy skills.

18. The teaching of literacy skills is very good across the curriculum. The school's adoption of the national literacy strategy techniques has resulted in the structured acquisition of literacy skills, to very good effect. Most departments make a good contribution and last year the school identified the development of pupils' writing as a focus for improvement across the curriculum. As part of this, most subject areas help pupils structure what they write, and they refer to banks of words to help pupils to learn specialist vocabulary. Many subjects, too, help pupils to develop their speaking and listening skills through discussion, and overall the standard of speaking and listening is very high.

19. The school's success in teaching numeracy also has a positive effect across the whole mathematics curriculum. Teachers take care to plan carefully and this leads to lessons that hold pupils' interest and provides opportunities for pupils to develop their investigative skills across the curriculum. In science, pupils are given support when calculating results and presenting findings in graphs. They are expected to measure accurately in design and technology. In history, they are given opportunities to calculate and present patterns and trends.

20. In most instances, pupils' learning is well supported by work being well matched to their learning needs with resources being used skilfully to this end. This is particularly well exemplified in some lessons in geography where pupils with special educational needs especially are well supported by materials being suitably adapted to ensure that they learn effectively.

21. Pupils with special educational needs are taught well across the curriculum because their needs are well known and good use is made of individual education plans. Literacy and numeracy individual education plans include clear and precise learning objectives which enable teachers to plan their work effectively for these pupils. Though targets set on individual education plans are generally of good quality, there is some inconsistency as regards specificity and attainability – in some instances, therefore, planning to enable pupils to achieve these targets is not always easy. Learning support assistants provide very effective support in lessons, for example, in a mathematics lesson, where the learning support assistant ensured that the pupils understood the task by re-stating and clarifying the teacher's explanations and instructions. In a Key Stage 2 literacy support session with Years 5 and 6 pupils, two learning support assistant's provided good quality support in developing pupils' literacy skills. One was developing pupils' word building skills using phonics and the other was effectively supporting those using the commercially produced ICT individual learning support programme.

22. Pupils' progress is monitored through regular assessment and marking but practice is more consistent at Key Stage 3 than at Key Stage 2. Marking is usually helpful with teachers writing comments highlighting good features and suggesting areas for improvement. Not all pupils, however, especially at Key Stage 2, have a clear understanding of what they need to do in order to reach the next attainment level because of teachers being uncertain in their interpretation of the levels, especially in the light of recent national changes in assessment levels. There are early indications that this problem is being addressed in some subjects, such as science, where assessment procedures are becoming more rigorous and securely based.

23. Where teaching was judged to be unsatisfactory in mathematics and geography it was because it was not effective in enabling pupils to progress well. For instance, in geography in one lesson learning opportunities were lost because too much time was devoted to a task without clear direction, and in the other there was a lack of challenge for higher attaining pupils. French teaching was unsatisfactory because on occasion at both key stages French was used too little in communication, and lesson planning failed to take sufficient account of pupils learning needs with too little challenge for the higher attaining pupils especially.

HOW GOOD ARE THE CURRICULAR AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED TO PUPILS OR STUDENTS?

24. The curriculum is broad and balanced in both key stages. All the National Curriculum requirements are met and the curriculum is enriched in Key Stage 2 by the addition of French and drama. Time allocations are reasonable except for history and geography, where the single period a week does not permit the curriculum to be covered in sufficient depth in history, and in geography the lower attainers find it difficult to keep pace with the work. In design and technology also there is not enough time for pupils to develop their analytical skills or to apply knowledge in different situations. The ICT programme in Key Stage 2 provides good courses in basic skills but, in Key Stage 3, where aspects of ICT are taught through other subjects, development is far less consistent. Although the schemes of work in most subjects indicate how they are going to include ICT, only in mathematics and English is there assessment of ICT skills.

25. The strategies for numeracy and literacy are very effective and the standards are high, particularly in English and mathematics but also in science, religious education and geography. Numeracy is well developed because teachers' detailed and appropriate objectives are systematically developed in the schemes of work. In geography, for example, pupils are given opportunities to practise their numeracy skills through work on hierarchies, tallying and nearest neighbour calculations when developing their understanding of the complexities of settlement growth. The successful application of the whole-school literacy policy is apparent in the way in which work done in one subject reinforces learning in another area. In English, pupils in Key Stage 3 work on a "survival" project, and one aspect of this involves using a specialist dictionary to look up geographical terms, thus helping pupils to make gains in knowledge and understanding in both subjects.

26. The provision for pupils with special educational needs is good. Through the policy of in-class support in mainstream lesson, all pupils have full and equal access to the school's curriculum. The special educational needs department has recently introduced a commercially-produced individual learning support programme. It is currently being used to support pupils' literacy needs in Key Stage 2. Where appropriate, special examination provision is made to help further those pupils identified as having special educational needs. For those who are talented in mathematics and French the partnership of local schools this year organised a summer school. In science, able scientists are monitored to ensure that they do not under-achieve.

27. The provision for personal, social and health education is satisfactory. Substantial improvements have been made since the last inspection when the provision was described as neither well planned nor well taught. A co-ordinator has developed the subject well throughout the school. In September 1999, hourly lessons were introduced and these are taught to each class by the form tutor. The comprehensive plan for the four-year course covers a wide range of issues. These include personal health, sex education, drugs abuse, safety, personal development and citizenship. There is, however, a need for aspects relating to careers to be included in the programme for Years 7 and 8. As personal, social and health education lessons did not take place during the inspection period, there was no opportunity to observe teaching.

28. In principle, all pupils have equal access to the curriculum and all other opportunities that the school offers. In practice, the issue requires further thought. In Key Stage 2, in particular, the quality of pupils' curriculum experience, and the standards they achieve, may depend on whether they are taught by someone with specialist qualifications. Pupils who are not taught in the art room or design and technology room do not have the same access to resources or as rich an experience as those who do. In geography in Year 8, only one group has the opportunity to use ICT. In physical education, on the other hand, boys and girls are taught in single and mixed gender groups. In music, boys and girls participate equally in activities and achieve equally well. Those with special educational needs are well supported and the gifted have the opportunity to play instruments and take instrumental examinations. For those who are unable to pay, it is possible to apply to the local education authority or the governors for assistance.

29. The provision of extra-curricular activities is very good, particularly in physical education and music. More than half the pupils take part in some sporting activity, either recreationally or in matches and competitions. Activities take place at lunch time and before and after school. More than 150 pupils take part in instrumental and vocal groups. There is a drama club for Years 5 and 6 and an art club which allows pupils to extend the range of an otherwise limited curriculum. Year 8 have a newspaper project and publish a termly magazine, making good use of desk top publishing software.

30. The school has very good links with the local and broader community. Several pupils have won music, sport and art commendations and awards presented by external organisations. Pupils have taken part in poetry and young writers competitions and have seen their work in print in regional and national publications. They have been successful in 'Voices of Promise' national competition which culminated in a recording of their performance. Pupils give concerts in school, in the Lower schools and in the community, for example, in a retirement home. The school premises are used extensively by local community groups. A varied programme of visiting speakers and educational visits enriches learning. Residential trips include skiing and field studies in Norfolk. Fifty pupils took part in an adventurous holiday in Shropshire. Day visits have been made to the Duxford War Museum, The Roald Dahl Museum, Cadbury World, The National Gallery and Sulgrave Manor. Visitors to the school have included a children's writer, the Greenlight Trust, musical groups, theatre groups presenting Shakespeare, speakers about medieval monks and American Indians. There are also visits by local ministers of religion.

31. Links with partner schools are excellent. These include not only familiarisation visits for children joining the school or moving on to the Upper school, but also curricular links to harmonise what is taught between the Lower and Middle schools and between the Middle and Upper schools. There is a very good transfer of assessment data and good collaboration about setting assessment criteria and moderating results. Senior students from the neighbouring Upper school support small numbers of Linslade pupils in a paired reading scheme.

32. The provision for pupils' moral and social education is very good, for their cultural education it is good and for their spiritual education it is satisfactory. The school has very high expectations of the pupils in terms of their application, attitudes and behaviour and their teachers are very good role models. Pupils are further encouraged by the system of merits and commendations. In religious education pupils discuss moral and religious issues. In English pupils are able to discuss questions of good and evil through the study of literature. In geography they discuss the moral issues relating to green-field development. From physical education they learn the respect for rules and the notion of fair play.

33. Pupils involved in choirs and ensembles recognise the need to practise, to attend rehearsals and performances, both for themselves and other members of the groups. Pupils' social skills are developed by the many opportunities to work together in pairs and groups, by the opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities, and by residential and other visits.

34. Pupils learn much about their own culture and culture in general through English, history, geography, art and music. There are also many opportunities for pupils to appreciate the richness and diversity of other cultures though these are less consistently available across the curriculum. Pupils learn about African, Indian and Caribbean music. In geography, they study other communities, such as Kenya, Italy and the European Union. In history they encounter the culture and traditions of Islam and the American Indian. In religious education pupils wrote a postcard as from a pilgrim to Mecca, and a letter describing a Sikh festival.

35. The spiritual dimension of the curriculum is satisfactory but less well developed and is too often confused with religion, though religious education is a major contributor. The requirement for a daily act of corporate worship is met, which was not the case at the last inspection. These assemblies make a positive contribution to the spiritual development of the pupils. They are conducted with dignity; relevant music is played before and after; the themes are relevant and there is time for reflection. Emphasis is placed in art and music on pupils' response to performance, whether it is that of a classmate or of some great master. In English, importance is attached to the appreciation of poetry, including William Blake, and the pupils' reaction to the spiritual and moral messages.

HOW WELL DOES THE SCHOOL CARE FOR ITS PUPILS?

36. The provision for pupils' welfare and guidance is very good. Pastoral support is a very strong feature of the school's work and this is much appreciated by parents and pupils. Pupils are given ready advice and support with any individual problems or concerns. The health and safety issues mentioned in the previous report were dealt with expeditiously. Governors and staff give a high priority to health and safety matters and regular safety checks are undertaken. Accidents and illness are dealt with competently by staff trained in first aid. Child protection matters are handled effectively.

37. Good procedures are in place for monitoring academic performance and personal development. Assessment is seen as an integral part of curriculum planning, teaching and learning, and the school policy sets out the purposes of the process and the criteria for good practice. It is the responsibility of the assessment co-ordinator who collects and analyses the data and produces a report for the head of each subject after each assessment period. The school has a sophisticated software package which is used to make a detailed analysis of the data, and the information derived is used to set targets for subject and whole-school performance. Subject heads are only just beginning to make use of the information to set targets for individuals and to modify the curriculum. Practice within departments is variable. It is best in mathematics, religious education and music, and is good in English and science. In these subjects, assessment is linked to National Curriculum levels and pupils are aware of the criteria for success; other subjects have some way to go. There is very good liaison with the Lower and the Upper schools with regard to assessment. The school receives the Key Stage 3 assessments of its pupils from the Upper school and agrees the curriculum division and the levels for the end of Year 8 assessments. There is a similar liaison with the Lower school. Teacher assessments in English and science from the Lower school continue to be refined through discussion between teachers. In other subjects there is further to go.

38. Form teachers carefully monitor personal development and know individual pupils well. Such information is valuable when reporting to parents and also for following up any individual problems which arise.

39. Excellent arrangements are in place for monitoring and promoting good attendance. Registration work is undertaken efficiently. Parents co-operate fully in notifying reasons for absence. Any follow-up action is quickly instigated and there is good liaison with the education welfare officer. The priority given to such matters is reflected in the high level of attendance and punctuality that is achieved.

40. Procedures for promoting high standards of behaviour are good. Following extensive consultation, a revised behaviour policy was introduced last year. Expectations are clearly set out in the Code of Conduct. Incentives for good behaviour include merit certificates and commendations at assemblies. Yellow cards are issued for unsatisfactory behaviour and sanctions include detentions, consultation with parents and ultimately exclusion. The procedures are well understood by pupils and usually implemented effectively. Nevertheless, some problems do arise with a minority of pupils, particularly during the lunch time period. The dining hall is relatively small and a large number of pupils with packed lunches have to eat in classrooms. The quality of the supervision arrangements in the playground and in some classrooms during the lunch hour needs to be improved.

HOW WELL DOES THE SCHOOL WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS?

41. The overall view of parents is that this is a good school. Parents are very pleased with the standards pupils achieve, the quality of the teaching and the way the school is led. The enthusiasm and hard work of the pupils are commended. Parents are also very impressed with the good behaviour, high attendance and the caring environment provided. A few parents are concerned about the lunchtime arrangements and about the behaviour of a small minority of pupils. Inspection evidence supports all these views.

42. About a quarter of parents responding to the questionnaire feel they are not well informed about how their child is getting on. They are uneasy about approaching the school with queries and have concerns about homework arrangements. Whilst recognising there are very good aspects of communications with parents, the school could do more to ensure all parents are comfortable in approaching the school. Evidence on homework is that although it is not set regularly in every subject it is used appropriately to support learning.

43. The school has satisfactory links with parents. The prospectus and the governors' annual report are of high quality and give comprehensive information about the school and its achievements. Weekly newsletters and a half-termly 'Update' publication give extensive coverage to recent and planned activities. The latest 16-page edition includes new items arising from suggestions made by parents in response to a survey undertaken by governors. Parents are updated on pupils' progress at the consultation meetings which are successful. This process is helped by the interim written reports issued in February and the annual reports sent out towards the end of the summer term. The annual reports could be improved by a greater emphasis on areas for development and clearer details of work undertaken in history and physical education.

44. Parents make a very good contribution to the work of the school and this is having a positive impact on pupils' learning. Consultation meetings about induction, pupils' progress and transfer to upper schools are well attended. Parental encouragement is a helpful feature of the homework arrangements. The close co-operation shown by parents of pupils with statements of special educational needs is very beneficial. Several parents help with swimming classes, school visits and transport to sports fixtures. School concerts, musical and other special events are well supported by parents. The Linslade Middle School Association organises a full programme of fund raising events and the proceeds are used to enhance facilities and learning resources.

HOW WELL IS THE SCHOOL LED AND MANAGED?

45. Good leadership and management are contributory factors in making Linslade an effective school. The headteacher provides a very clear focus on raising the quality of education which extends beyond improving test and examination results. The excellent links with partner schools and the contribution to the local education authority's School Improvement Project are indicators of the headteacher's commitment to partnership as a key to sustained progress and improving standards. Since the last inspection the structure of the senior team has changed several times. From September 2000 two assistant headteachers and an assessment co-ordinator share responsibilities at senior level. Their complementary skills and clear imperatives make a good contribution to the efficient management and smooth running of the school. The management of heads of subject and heads of year through consultation, monitoring and professional support contributes well to the maintenance of high standards of teaching and learning and the consistent implementation of school policies. The strong commitment and good leadership of most team leaders is reflected in the high academic standards and impressive quality of pastoral care and welfare which have been sustained since the last inspection. The leadership of English and religious education is particularly strong.

46. The special educational needs co-ordinator manages the provision for pupils with special educational needs well. The school pays full regard to the statutory requirements and the school's register of pupils with special educational needs is efficiently organised and updated regularly. The good quality organisation and management have ensured the issues raised in the last report have been addressed. Strengths at the time of the last report have been maintained and further developments and improvements in provision have been made.

47. Though the school has an equal opportunities policy no senior member of staff has responsibility for ensuring its implementation and there is little reference in school documentation such as schemes of work, as to how the policy is interpreted. Whilst teachers plan their work to take account of the different needs of pupils there is no monitoring of the management of classes including the extent to which equal demands are made on boys and girls, for example, in contributing to discussions and questions or the use of appropriate terminology and avoidance of stereotyping. There are a number of examples of inequality of access of pupils to the same teaching programme and access to specialist staff and accommodation.

48. Since the last inspection the governing body has developed an appreciation of its role in monitoring and contributing to the school's development. Closer involvement with staff, pupils and parents through visits to classrooms, meetings with staff, and surveys of parental perceptions of the school have given the governing body a satisfactory understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and strengthened its ability to debate issues with the headteacher. Individual governors bring professional expertise in finance, surveying, building and personnel management which is helpful to the school. The nominated governor for special needs, for example, an experienced practitioner in this specialism, acts as a very effective critical friend to the special educational needs department. This is achieved through setting herself a variety of targets which include observing the impact of new teaching strategies and assisting with testing in reading. The governing body is successful in fulfilling all its statutory responsibilities but recognises that there is some way to go before it plays a full part in shaping the direction of the school.

49. The school is successful in enabling pupils to achieve high standards within all aspects of a broad, all round education; preparing pupils well in most respects for subsequent stages of education and equipping them with the skills they need to make a confident, happy and responsible transition to adult life. The achievement of these aims is strongly reflected in the rich curriculum provided, the evident desire of pupils and teachers to give of their best and the very good relationships between adults and pupils which leads to academic and personal success. The school knows that not all parents think that it succeeds in its aim to have effective links with them. Systems of communication have been improved but the quality and style of interaction does not convince parents that the school welcomes all queries or concerns.

50. The development of strategies for monitoring and evaluating aspects of the school's performance was a key issue at the time of the last inspection. The good systems of data analysis and monitoring of pupils' classwork which are now in place enable staff to track pupils' progress from Key Stage 1 to the end of Key Stage 3 and beyond. A good system of lesson observation by senior managers has contributed to raised standards of teaching through the identification of common weaknesses and the sharing of good practice. The delegation of monitoring of teaching to team leaders is a recent move to improve the system further by reducing the inconsistency of teaching within subjects of the curriculum. Where monitoring has taken place by team leaders, the contribution to improved teaching is apparent. For example, in design and technology it has resulted in more varied approaches to teaching and improved lesson content and assessment procedures. More generally, monitoring of the curriculum has led to a better match of work to the prior attainment of pupils. There is further work to be done in monitoring the contribution that subjects of the curriculum make to pupils' spiritual and cultural development and to identify opportunities, for example, for enhancement.

51. The quality of planning for improvement is good. The local education authority development plan provides the basis for school development. Within this framework the school has identified relevant issues for improvement in learning through teaching, curriculum, behaviour management, personnel and management and premises. Appropriate strategies have been developed to achieve these objectives and the school development plan includes measurable success criteria. The school sets appropriately high targets for pupils' attainment. The impact of the recent emphasis on writing is reflected in the good quality of writing across the curriculum.

52. Until this year the school has been constrained financially in its ability to plan for development. With more flexibility the governing body is well placed to reconsider its policy of relying on parental contributions to support the work in textiles, art and design and technology. Resources are used effectively to support identified priorities. Money from specific grants is carefully monitored and used for the designated purpose. Since the last inspection the school has developed a system for distributing money to subjects and placed greater emphasis on costing priorities for development. Each subject now prepares a fully costed development plan in addition to the request for a maintenance budget. The cost-effectiveness of spending for subject areas is examined by the headteacher and related to pupil performance. Principles of best value are applied well by the bursar through review of the services bought and investigating value for money when making capital purchases, for example, ICT.

53. The commitment to improvement in the school is very strong and its capacity to do so is good. Since the last inspection the level of improvement has been good. Standards of attainment have improved over the last three years. The quality of teaching has also improved. Lessons have clear objectives and are well-planned to meet the different needs and prior attainment of pupils. Progress in implementing the key issues for action identified in 1995 has been good. The headteacher has brought about improvements in school management including better co-ordination of the curriculum, more effective use of the skills of staff and more systematic evaluation of the quality of education. Daily assemblies have been restored. All health and safety issues have been addressed. The effectiveness of spending is now given due consideration.

54. The school is very well placed to meet the requirement to introduce performance management through its good systems of monitoring and evaluation and its previous strategies for the appraisal of the headteacher and staff. Staff welcome the opportunity to reflect on their ability to create a stimulating teaching environment, skills in classroom control and effectiveness in planning, and to discuss these issues with the appraiser and have the opportunity to identify their development needs. Consideration has been given to the development of the performance management policy and the selection of team leader and a training day has been arranged.

55. A very good system of induction and in service training enables staff to feel professionally supported and assisted in raising standards of teaching. Mentoring of staff new to the profession, to the school or to posts of responsibility, helps staff to be familiar with the expectations of the school, its procedures and routines. Recent attention in the training programme to ICT has contributed to increased confidence in its use. In service training on improvement in learning and links with other schools have contributed to improved standards of literacy and widened the range of teaching styles.

56. The match of teachers and support staff to the curriculum is satisfactory. Due consideration is given to building year and key stage teams which contain a balance of specialist teachers. In Year 5 the majority of lessons are taught by the class teacher to ease the transition from the first school. Specialist teaching is gradually increased with the intention of the subjects of the curriculum in Year 8 being taught mostly by specialist teachers. In practice, this happens more consistently than in the past. Where teachers have to teach outside their specialism there is a need in subjects to develop their expertise. The amount of time teachers spend in direct contact with the class is high and leaves little time for staff to prepare lessons and carry out their management responsibilities. The school is well served by its support staff who provide valuable clerical, accounting, technical and maintenance assistance.

57. Satisfactory use is made of new technologies in school administration and management. Good use is made of ICT for analysing assessment data. The range and quality of learning resources are satisfactory overall. The supply of books in the classrooms is adequate but the range of books in the library does not support wider reading and research, for example, in art and mathematics. A good range of resources in design and technology stimulate creative ideas. However, the lack of variety of materials and artefacts in history does not provide pupils with sufficient opportunity to develop their skills in the critical use of sources. Specialist equipment for practical subjects enables pupils to follow a broad curriculum. Recently improved resources in ICT have supported its use across the curriculum for research, handling number, collecting and communicating information. The one personal computer in the music department is inadequate to meet the requirement of the National Curriculum.

58. The accommodation allows the curriculum to be taught effectively in all subjects except music. Inadequate space in the music room places limitations on the curricular provision which depresses individual achievement. The school's large site provides facilities for physical education. The specialist facilities for science, design and technology and art enable pupils to reach high standards of creative and practical skills. Occasional lessons in design and technology and art which are taught in non-specialist rooms limit what can be taught.

59. Taking into account the above average income into the school, the above average social context in which the school operates, pupils' good progress and the above average standards they attain, the good quality of teaching and the efficient use of resources, the school provides good value for money.

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

60. To improve still further the quality of its provision and the standards achieved the school should:

- raise the standards of teaching French (paragraphs 6, 13, 14, 23, 121, 123)
- improve the consistency of the quality of teaching through effective monitoring by heads of subject (paragraphs 50, 75, 83, 88, 101, 126, 137)
- address the time allocation to history and geography in Key Stage 2 and the provision for ICT in Key Stage 3 (paragraphs 6, 24, 78, 100, 101, 110, 116, 124)
- improve pupils' spiritual and multicultural development throughout the curriculum (paragraphs 34, 35, 50)
- monitor the equality of opportunity (paragraphs 28, 47, 88, 114)
- improve the arrangements for supervision during lunchtime (paragraphs 9, 40)
- improve the effectiveness of communication with parents (paragraphs 42, 49)
- improve the involvement of all governors in shaping the direction of the school. (paragraph 48)

PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	100
Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and pupils	44

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
3	26	45	20	6	0	0

The table gives the percentage of teaching observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about lessons.

Information about the school's pupils

Pupils on the school's roll	Y5 – Y8	
Number of pupils on the school's roll	649	
Number of full-time pupils eligible for free school meals	16	

Special educational needs	Y5 – Y8	
Number of pupils with statements of special educational needs	7	
Number of pupils on the school's special educational needs register	145	

English as an additional language	No of pupils
Number of pupils with English as an additional language	3

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No of pupils
Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	13
Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving	14

Attendance

Authorised absence

	%
School data	4.1
National comparative data	6.0

Unauthorised absence

	%
School data	0.2
National comparative data	0.4

Both tables give the percentage of half days (sessions) missed through absence for the latest complete reporting year.

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 2

	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
Number of registered pupils in final year of Key Stage 2 for the latest reporting year	1999	74	69	143

National Curriculum Test/Task Results		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of pupils at NC level 4 and above	Boys	62	64	67
	Girls	55	49	59
	Total	117	113	126
Percentage of pupils at NC level 4 or above	School	82 (67)	79 (58)	88 (71)
	National	70 (65)	69 (59)	78 (69)

Teachers' Assessments		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of pupils at NC level 4 and above	Boys	50	61	62
	Girls	51	48	58
	Total	101	109	120
Percentage of pupils at NC level 4 or above	School	71 (59)	76 (70)	84 (71)
	National	68 (65)	69 (65)	75 (71)

Percentages in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Ethnic background of pupils

	No of pupils
Black – Caribbean heritage	
Black – African heritage	
Black – other	
Indian	2
Pakistani	
Bangladeshi	
Chinese	
White	544
Any other minority ethnic group	103

Exclusions in the last school year

	Fixed period	Permanent
Black – Caribbean heritage		
Black – African heritage		
Black – other		
Indian		
Pakistani		
Bangladeshi		
Chinese		
White	7	
Other minority ethnic groups		

This table gives the number of exclusions, which may be different from the number of pupils excluded.

Teachers and classes

Qualified teachers and classes: Y5 – Y8

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	28.3
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	22.9

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Education support staff: Y5 – Y8

Total number of education support staff	9.0
Total aggregate hours worked per week	25

Deployment of teachers: Y5 – Y8

Percentage of time teachers spend in contact with classes	84.6
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Average teaching group size: Y5 – Year 8

Key Stage 2	27.0
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Financial information

Financial year	99/00
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	£
Total income	1180625
Total expenditure	1187256
Expenditure per pupil	1813
Balance brought forward from previous year	34329
Balance carried forward to next year	27698

Results of the survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out	650
Number of questionnaires returned	374

Percentage of responses in each category

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school.	29	60	8	2	1
My child is making good progress in school.	28	61	5	1	5
Behaviour in the school is good.	20	64	9	1	6
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.	10	63	19	3	5
The teaching is good.	21	72	3	0	4
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.	15	55	23	2	5
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.	34	50	12	1	3
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.	42	51	3	0	4
The school works closely with parents.	14	50	26	3	7
The school is well led and managed.	27	58	6	1	8
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.	26	60	6	0	8
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.	16	52	13	4	15

PART D: THE STANDARDS AND QUALITY OF TEACHING IN AREAS OF THE CURRICULUM, SUBJECTS AND COURSES

ENGLISH

61. The majority of pupils come into the school with attainment levels that are higher than the national average. The national literacy strategy is having a positive impact on learning in the Lower schools, and standards in literacy are rising on entry to this school.

62. During the two years from entry to the end of Key Stage 2, pupils make good progress in English. By the end of Key Stage 2, pupils are attaining levels in National Curriculum tests which are well above national averages. In the 1999 test results, compared with schools with a similar social intake, pupils' results were above average attainment levels. The performance by pupils in English has fluctuated a little, but in general has improved over the last four years. By the end of Key Stage 2 all pupils listen well and most express themselves confidently using a fairly wide range of vocabulary. Higher attaining pupils speak fluently in a range of contexts and what they say is interesting and engaging. They identify key features from texts which they read, and quote relevant passages to support their point of view. By the end of Key Stage 2, all pupils have been introduced to basic techniques of literary criticism, and average and lower attaining pupils are beginning to understand why a writer might choose to use a simile or a metaphor, to make the text more interesting to read. Higher attaining pupils' understanding of literary style is well developed. Pupils have been introduced to a range of literature, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Alice in Wonderland*.

63. Pupils achieve well in English at both key stages. When they leave to go to the Upper school at the end of Year 8, most are in line to achieve levels at the end of Key Stage 3 which are much higher than those expected nationally. Lower attaining pupils write simple sentences accurately using a reasonably wide range of vocabulary, and they attempt complex sentences to convey meaning, using punctuation to mark sentences. Higher attaining pupils write both formally and informally and they choose vocabulary precisely. They use a range of punctuation and paragraphing correctly. By the end of Year 8, pupils have read a range of literature including *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* and they have been introduced to *Beowulf* and the work of Tennyson and Chaucer. All pupils listen very well and speak confidently. Teachers know targets which are identified in individual educational plans and they use appropriate strategies to help pupils with special educational needs make good progress, in line with other pupils.

64. Pupils have positive attitudes to learning. In lessons observed pupils were attentive and conscientious. In one lesson, for example, a Year 6 lesson on Roald Dahl's *Boy*, pupils were working in groups, and they organised themselves and took the initiative in moving the discussion on with impressive maturity. In another lesson, a Year 7 group was working on a project to do with food. They concentrated and listened well, and their positive attitudes contributed to the creation of a good climate for learning.

65. The quality of teaching overall is good, and is very good in particular at Key Stage 2. No unsatisfactory teaching was observed during the inspection. When teaching is good or very good, teachers plan interesting, challenging work and have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They plan work well for pupils of differing attainment levels within the same lesson. For example, in a Year 6 lesson, the teacher used national literacy strategy techniques effectively in order to stretch and challenge pupils. She questioned pupils closely to check what they had understood and pointed out technical features of the text that was being studied, such as alliteration, synonyms and descriptive writing. Different groups of pupils within the one lesson were working on different activities, according to their attainment levels. These strategies all contributed to pupils making good progress in understanding the text and in improving their literacy skills. In another lesson observed, a Year 5 class made very good progress in understanding how and when to change tense. The teacher's confidence in using national literacy strategy techniques and her very good subject knowledge contributed to the progress which pupils made. Where teaching is less good, whilst still being satisfactory, teachers talk for rather a long time when introducing and explaining the lesson, and pupils wait patiently, keen to get on with their work. The department might choose to focus on the timing of lessons and the extent of the explanations and instructions given to pupils, with a view to improving the quality of teaching even further.

66. The English curriculum is very well planned and meets all National Curriculum requirements. Units which include ICT are planned into schemes of work for all year groups, and in Years 6 and 7 teachers assess pupils' work for levels in ICT as well as in English. Drama is integrated into units of work, too, and pupils get many opportunities to extend their skills and knowledge through visits out of school and through presentations given by visiting speakers. Other departments make useful contributions to raising pupils' literacy skills, through the use of techniques such as structured writing and word banks.

67. There are good procedures for assessing pupils. All pupils have half-termly assessments for which National Curriculum levels are used, and pupils have targets to which they are encouraged to aim. Pupils' work is marked helpfully, with teachers writing comments highlighting good features and suggesting areas for improvement. Not all pupils, however, have a clear understanding of what they need to do in order to attain the next attainment level.

68. The head of subject provides very effective leadership. There are 18 teachers who teach English and literacy in the school, and the co-ordination of such a large team is effectively managed. The school decided to prioritise the promotion of literacy skills when the national literacy strategy was introduced, and for that first year the head of subject focused on teaching and learning at Key Stage 2. She targeted lessons in this key stage for monitoring and observation, and teachers had appropriate training in teaching literacy skills. Schemes of work were revised. The following year it was decided to target improving attainment in writing, and the head of subject focused on this in her monitoring of lessons. The department assesses pupils against National Curriculum levels, and these and other assessment data are used to target pupils' achievement.

69. The department has made good progress since the last inspection. There has been a significant rise in attainment levels, and the national literacy strategies are being very effectively employed. New schemes of work have been produced, assessment practices have been revised, and the system of monitoring and observing lessons has considerably developed. Areas for future development include the further strengthening of teaching and continuing the work on assessing pupils so that they all have a clear understanding of what they need to do in order to improve. The department is very well placed to advance even further.

MATHEMATICS

70. The pupils' attainment is above average throughout the school. The National Curriculum test results at the end of Year 6 have followed an improving trend over recent years. The 1999 results were well above the national average especially for the boys. These results were in line with those achieved in similar schools. The National Curriculum test results of 2000 indicate further improvement in the proportion of pupils gaining at least level 4 and the advance in mathematics was greater than those in English and science.

71. Pupils' achievement in mathematics throughout the school is satisfactory overall. In a substantial majority of the lessons seen in all years the pupils' attainment was at least average with significant proportions of both boys and girls attaining above average. By the end of Year 6 pupils attain standards above the national average. They are using percentages and able to find the area and perimeter of a range of shapes. They are acquiring good investigative strategies to solve problems. By the time they leave the school at the end of Year 8 they are able to devise instructions for a computer to generate and transform shapes. The lower attaining pupils are starting to complete simple algebraic equations while the highest attaining pupils have acquired sufficient skills that enable them to solve simultaneous equations. The pupils' competence and confidence when using the skills of mental arithmetic are distinctive features of their work; this stems from the emphasis that teachers rightly place on these basic skills and their firm insistence that calculators are used with discrimination. Overall attainment is currently above average and pupils are on track to maintain this to the end of Year 8. The skills of mathematics are drawn upon to support learning in other subjects and notably so in geography, science and design and technology. The satisfactory application of these skills reflects the steps that the school has taken to promote numeracy across the curriculum.

72. The pupils are strongly motivated. Their commitment is clearly reflected in the good quality of the written work. Pupils' attitudes to learning were at least satisfactory in all the lessons seen and in most they were good or very good. This positive picture owes much to the quality of relationships in lessons and to the care taken by teachers to plan interesting lessons. This extends to classes where pupils find particular difficulty with the subject as in Year 5 lesson on number; here their enjoyable participation in a 'number orchestra' served to increase their understanding of factors and multiples.

73. The teaching was good overall. It was at least satisfactory in almost all the lessons seen and very good or excellent in two of the 15 lessons. The teaching was unsatisfactory in one lesson; this was because the teacher did not ensure that the pupils made adequate progress during the lesson. The most effective teaching is characterised by a professional vigour that sets the tone of the lesson and the pace of learning. Teachers plan their lessons thoroughly and often include a variety of learning activities to hold pupils' concentration and interest. Consequently, lessons are productive because pupils become fully engaged and make progress. In all except one lesson the pupils were progressing at least satisfactorily and, in more than half, their progress was good or very good. This latter was exemplified in a Year 6 lesson on probability where the teacher's detailed planning and good organisation of equipment ensured that the pupils' practical work led to a productive comparison between the experimental outcomes and the underlying theory. When pupils enter the school in Year 5 the tasks set to them are appropriately pitched partly as a result of teachers having given due attention to attainment records from the contributory schools. Most pupils in the lower attaining classes are progressing satisfactorily in relation to their previous attainments; this results from well-judged teaching as well as the pupils' whole-hearted attitudes to work. The pupils with special learning needs in mathematics also progress well particularly when benefiting from additional adult support in the classroom.

74. In Years 7 and 8 most of the teaching is undertaken by teachers with little mathematics in their training background. Mathematical limitations were occasionally evident in the lessons observed at Key Stage 3 but these were of minor importance and did not detract from the impact of thorough lesson planning and effective teaching. Nevertheless, there remains a need, as pointed out in the previous inspection report, to strengthen mathematical expertise as soon as opportunities arise.

75. Homework is set regularly and taken seriously by pupils. Teachers are regular in their marking and sometimes add additional written comments. While the best practice is clearly helpful to pupils, there is unevenness overall. A good structure is in place for the recording of pupils' individual attainments but teachers remain over-cautious in their assessments and particularly so in relation to the ablest pupils. Consequently, assessments are not properly informing the teachers' pitching of the tasks set to pupils. There is insufficient monitoring to check unevenness in current practice in mathematics.

76. The improvements in standards, in teaching and in learning represent a good response to the issues raised in the previous report and reflect effective leadership. There remains need, however, to review the arrangements for assessments and to raise the overall usefulness of teachers' marking.

SCIENCE

77. The 1999 end of Key Stage 2 National Curriculum test results were well above average. When compared with similar schools, performance was above average. Boys performed better than girls but the difference was in line with that found nationally. Performance over four years has been above average with improvement in 1999. Results in the current tests indicate the school's performance has been sustained. By the end of Year 8 standards are well above those expected of pupils of their age and set to be well above average by the end of Key Stage 3. Teacher assessments show that pupils attain above average standards in investigations by the end of Key Stage 2 and Year 8.

78. The work seen during the inspection confirms national test results. Pupils achieve very well and attain standards well above those expected for their age in both key stages. Pupils reach very good standards in scientific thinking because teachers have high expectations for problem solving. They improve their powers of analysis through very good discussions and higher attaining pupils in particular offer carefully reasoned answers. Standards in practical investigation are good because pupils are expected to initiate their own planning and are challenged to consider evidence and evaluate their experimental results. At the end of Key Stage 2, pupils are very systematic in producing flow charts for the process of filtration. They are inquisitive about their results and realise the need for precision in preparing resources. Higher attaining pupils have a very good understanding of how to recover salt from its solution by evaporation. Year 8 pupils have a good grasp of reaction rates of metals and are excited by new work to discover how some metals displace another in solution. They understand why their pulse increases after exercise and use sensors to gain readings on the computer screen. They are now ready to be more analytical about the benefits of using computers for recording results in order to make very good use of such information in their written work. Overall, they need greater frequency in using computers if all pupils are to reach good standards in ICT. Standards of literacy are very good. Pupils have an extensive scientific vocabulary, producing appropriate accounts of their work. They apply number skills well in recording experimental results. They draw graphs and charts well when the need arises. Pupils with special educational needs make good progress.

79. Pupils have very positive attitudes to learning and behave well in lessons. They respond very well to lively teaching and are serious minded about their work. They are creative and amusing when conveying scientific ideas in their own words and are constructively argumentative before accepting an explanation. They co-operate well in teams, managing practical resources very well. Pupils enjoy very good relationships with teachers who praise enthusiasm and hard work. This gives pupils real pleasure in their work, influencing the very good standards achieved. Everyone responds very well to fulfilling safety procedures.

80. Teaching is very good leading to well above average achievement in both key stages. Year 5 pupils make a very good transition from lower schools, eagerly improving their skills, knowledge and understanding. They recall earlier knowledge of light and sound and quickly appreciate abstract ideas, gaining a real sense of fun from well-planned practical tasks. Year 7 pupils quickly adjust to the Key Stage 3 programme. They use light sensors very well to make refined measurements of change and this has a very good effect on the quality of learning. Pupils with special educational needs make good progress, particularly in practical work where they are very well integrated with their peers. They sometimes need more help with written work in order to gain maximum benefit from practical sessions. Lively and imaginative methods capture pupils' interests and challenge them very effectively. A Year 7 lesson has an excellent start because the teacher played the role of a clumsy professor, presenting a scientific dilemma that challenged and sustained their involvement throughout the lesson. Pupils are expected to think for themselves and are developing a good sense of initiative and responsibility. Expectations for them to take manage equipment and pace of work increase independence and resourcefulness.

81. The teaching of basic skills in literacy is very well developed. Language skills are very good because teachers emphasise the importance of clear speaking, with high expectations for the use of scientific vocabulary. When a teacher takes time to read to pupils, they extend their interest in the history of science. The teaching of numeracy is good. Pupils are given good support to complete calculations and produce graphs. The development of skills in ICT is planned for within schemes and opportunities for using resources are improving.

82. Assessment is good. Teachers are becoming more rigorous in using assessment and are beginning to give pupils a better understanding of the standards used to assess their performance. They are not setting targets for improvement. There is currently no system for assessing progress in the use of ICT. Teachers set homework regularly and mark work well.

83. Leadership and management are good. The team reflects the aims of the school well in its work to raise standards and in doing the best for pupils. Good communication within a committed team ensures consistent practice over agreed policies, evident in the development of problem solving. The quality of pupil monitoring has improved and systems to show their achievements over their time in school are now good. The subject leader is now in a good position to analyse such information in order to set very challenging targets for groups of pupils and year groups as a whole. Attention to equal opportunities is generally effective but the team needs to monitor the work of boys and girls continually in lessons to ensure that both are achieving appropriately high levels. The monitoring of teaching is developing. Good ideas are shared between staff, but outcomes need to be more carefully documented in order to evaluate changes made. New staff and non-specialist science teachers are supported well.

84. There has been very good improvement in standards since the last inspection as a result of significant improvement in teaching and learning.

ART

85. Pupils' art skills on entry reflect the expected range of attainment. They have, though, a strong sense of spatial awareness which helps them greatly in their art work. They achieve well in Key Stage 2 and attain standards at the end of Year 6 above expectations overall. In some aspects of their work, pupils attain well above the standards expected, particularly in two-dimensional areas such as drawing and painting. Boys' standards in particular are often well above the expectation for boys. Some observational drawing of fruit and vegetables in one Year 6 lesson showed very high competence from most pupils in their use of inks as a drawing medium. Many produced very sensitively drawn, coloured images which were well above expectation for their age, especially those of boys. Other classes doing the same project have good levels of these skills, and attainment in the variety of two-dimensional media pupils use is good, and often very good. In three-dimensional work, which pupils experience much less often in their curriculum, standards match expectations. By the end of Year 6, all pupils have made good progress in art. Almost all pupils thus take with them a high standard of core art skills and understanding when they move into Key Stage 3. References to other artists' work and the history of art are now appropriately linked to practical studies, and pupils understand these aspects of the curriculum well. They continue to make good progress and achieve well through Key Stage 3, again, particularly in two-dimensional work. Boys' standards remain above the expectations for boys by a greater margin than that of girls. Very few pupils at either key stage fall below average. Those who do are often pupils with special educational needs whose standards represent good or very good achievement given their learning difficulties. By Year 8, pupils' attainment remains above expectation overall. High quality colour work in painting, textiles, pastels, drawing and so on, often displayed prominently around the school, shows well above the standard of skill expected for their age in the use of two-dimensional media. Three-dimensional work continues to show the expected range of competence.

86. A significant factor in pupils' good learning is their positive attitude to the subject, combined with willingness to get on sensibly with their work. They work purposefully and effectively, enjoying their projects and appreciating their developing skills, particularly as they get older. Relationships are often very good in classes, with pupils sometimes heard to praise each other's work spontaneously. They have also clearly benefited from the opportunities offered since the last report, to evaluate work and discuss this openly. Pupils are very confident, now, to discuss the development of their work, and what they have learned. Behaviour is good, and most pupils have an unusual ability to recognise and ignore the occasional poorer behaviour of classmates who seek to spoil their learning environment.

87. Teaching is good overall and in some lessons it is very good. No unsatisfactory teaching was seen. Non-specialist teaching at Key Stage 2 now has no adverse effects on standards. Classes are managed in a calm, quiet manner, which rapidly settles pupils to good concentration and learning. Good subject knowledge is well transmitted to pupils through effective direct teaching, as, for example, in a Year 7 demonstration about batik techniques. Teachers' most effective method of pushing pupils to higher attainment, however, is through well-differentiated individual teaching sessions occurring during lessons. Skills teaching is very good. Well-informed lesson and project introductions show pupils clearly what to do, and how, to achieve the results required. Lesson endings are not always so well focused though, and could usefully be strengthened to include more opportunities for pupils not involved in clearing up, to discuss the lessons' achievements. Relative weaknesses in pupils' three-dimensional skills could be addressed by allowing abler pupils in Year 8 to decide on final outcomes of their own projects. These could usefully involve group work, larger scale work and the use of information and communications technology which is currently weak. The quality of teaching overall has improved significantly since the last inspection.

88. Subject management is good. All the key issues from the last report have been improved, and assessment has developed well. Opportunities afforded to Key Stage 2 pupils who have art in the specialist art room, with the subject specialist, are not available to all. A few pupils' less positive attitudes to the subject can be traced to this lack of opportunity in Key Stage 2. Some classes do not encounter specialist provision until Year 6, placing them at some disadvantage against those who do. The head of subject has started to undertake monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in other groups which needs to be developed further as does the equality of opportunity in the subject for all pupils.

DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

89. Performance in the 1999 National Curriculum Key Stage 2 teacher assessment for design and technology was below what pupils of a similar age would be expected to attain. The majority of pupils in Year 6 were assessed only at Level 3. However, evidence seen in lessons and from samples of work shows that the majority of these pupils are working at a higher level, especially in resistant materials and are attaining the standards above those expected of their age. The 1999 Key Stage 3 teachers' assessments for pupils in Year 8 were again below the average for pupils of a similar age. Lesson observations suggest, however, that this does not properly reflect the pupils' real achievement at this stage which is at least in line with what is expected for pupils of a similar age. Considerable improvement was made in 2000 when a third of the year group were assessed at level 5 and a small minority were assessed at level 6. Pupils with special educational needs make good progress at both key stages in practical lessons and satisfactory progress is made in food theory lessons.

90. Inspection evidence confirms that pupils achieve well in Key Stage 2 and are making good progress in developing designing and making skills, especially in resistant materials. High standards were seen in Year 5 when pupils used equipment competently, for example, in making prototypes for their facial masks. This group was supported effectively by the class teacher and the classroom assistant. The teacher's high expectations and good resources helped to develop the pupils' imaginative ideas. Another Year 5 class making masks used resource materials to study masks from different cultures and countries. Practical skills are developing well. Most pupils quickly acquire basic skills in preparing fruits and vegetables and work in an organised manner, producing successful dishes. They have a basic understanding of nutrition and use technical terminology accurately. Pupils make satisfactory progress in Key Stage 3 and by the end of Year 8 are achieving the standards expected for pupils of a similar age. Achievement in this key stage in aspects of design and technology is adversely affected by group size. Because the food technology groups are large, half a class does practical work whilst the other half concentrates on appropriate theory work. Though work is well organised, opportunities for the development of individual creativity are sometimes lost and this limits the standards pupil can achieve. Some pupils with special educational needs have difficulty in sustaining concentration when not closely supervised. Resistant material lessons at Key Stage 3 enable pupils to learn how to use ICT. In a lesson on designing logos for promotional materials, pupils showed very competent skills in the use of accurate measurement and in cutting 'mock-ups' of boxes, containers and bags. ICT is used in Year 8 to extend previous learning of formal drawing techniques. Pupils used ICT successfully to draw orthographic drawings of a pencil box, thus learning how designers in industry develop their ideas and transpose them onto computer. High attainers are making very good progress in resistant materials and good progress in food technology. The average attaining pupils generally make good progress when they have mastered basic skills in using tools and equipment. Satisfactory progress is made by the lower attainers, particularly in practical activities.

91. Teaching is good overall and occasionally it is very good. No unsatisfactory teaching was observed. The requirements of the National Curriculum are covered well. The planning for progression over the key stages is thorough and detailed, and all pupils experience a range of materials. Samples of work in textiles, such as animal hand embroidered oven-mits, indicate that satisfactory teaching in this aspect of design and technology enables pupils to acquire basic skills. Teaching enables pupils to develop their design and technology capability well, applying and using what they have done in some lessons to work in others. For example, in their ICT lessons in Year 6, pupils design puppet shapes and these designs are then made and decorated in textile lessons. In art lessons in Year 7, pupils learn to tie and dye and do batik work, the prints are then completed by using the sewing machine and hand stitching. The emphasis placed on neatly presented work, sketching techniques and the appropriate use of colour enables pupils to communicate their ideas well. The teaching of graphics in Year 8 raises the standards further. Good use is made of plastics in the manufacture of clocks, and basic electronics is taught. Homework is set regularly at Key Stage 3 and it is generally used to reinforce learning in lessons. However, some pupils fail to submit or record their homework.

92. Assessment is an integral part of the teachers' planning at both key stages and is moderated across the material areas and with staff from the contributory Lower schools and Upper school. Reviews of tasks are undertaken regularly and adapted or extended to incorporate new learning when appropriate. Monitoring of teaching is done regularly by the senior management team and the line manager and the head of subject observes colleagues. The benefits of this monitoring have been seen in the changes in approach to teaching and in assessing what pupils have learnt and understood.

93. Pupils respond very positively to the subject and are enthusiastic and interested. They take pride in their work and listen carefully to instructions. A few do show some slight frustrations when doing theory work in food technology lessons but the majority sustain concentration. Although not always confident, all enjoy practical lessons and they are particularly good at articulating their design ideas fully. Year 7 and 8 pupils have developed good design skills and are modestly keen to show their achievements.

94. Curriculum time is adequate for Key Stage 2 but some pupils do not have the opportunity to use the specialist work rooms having their lesson in their form room. This has an adverse affect on the range of materials and equipment that they can experience. The lessons at Key Stage 3 are well managed to give pupils maximum experience in the different range of materials. Literacy skills are given a high priority in lessons and accurate measuring is encouraged. The department benefits from good management and priorities for spending have been carefully assessed. The good links with the Lower school and the Upper school have helped to monitor progress over all the key stages and the sharing of ideas and concerns has been beneficial in developing curriculum 2000. New Opportunities Funding has helped in the development of ICT skills and the provision of software for nutritional analysis and control work in resistant materials.

95. Improvements since the last inspection have been made in developing and using ICT within the schemes of work. Health and safety issues have been addressed, although the food room is still too small for a full group to work in safety. The additional support from the classroom assistants has been particularly beneficial in supporting the pupils in practical lessons. In order to improve standards, all pupils should have equal access to specialist rooms.

GEOGRAPHY

96. Assessments by teachers show that standards of work at the end of Key Stage 2 and at the end of Year 8 are above those expected for pupils of these ages. Evidence from the inspection confirms these standards. These results represent an improvement since the last inspection. There is no significant difference between the performance of girls and boys.

97. Pupils enter the school in Year 5 with a wide range of geographical understanding. By the end of Key Stage 2 most pupils are able to annotate plans and give very good oral descriptions of routeways, gradually extending their learning from studies of the familiar surroundings of the school site. Some pupils use ICT to produce accurate accounts of their journeys to school. Higher attaining pupils write fluently and can describe the impact of rivers on the landscape. However, some lower attaining pupils find it difficult to complete written tasks and not all pupils had a full record in their books of topics that have been studied. Differences in the standards achieved reflect the range of pupils' previous attainment, variations in teaching technique and the reduction in time available for the study of geography since the last inspection.

98. By the end of Year 8, the standard of work produced is above expectations for pupils of this age. Pupils acquire a good knowledge of local geology by studying rock formation which they relate to well-known landmarks such as Dunstable Downs and quarry sites. They use role-play and debating skills to extend their understanding of settlement growth from different points of view. In their study of landscapes, pupils can draw accurate cross sections from Ordnance Survey maps. They use statistics to produce climate graphs which they then use to describe and compare climatic patterns. There is a noticeable increase in the quantity and quality of work produced in this key stage, reflecting the extra time available for the study of geography in Years 7 and 8 and the availability of specialist teaching. The teachers' high expectations and individual help stretch the achievements of pupils with average or lower levels of attainment.

99. Pupils' achievement and progress overall is good in both key stages. In Key Stage 2, however, only a single period per week is allocated for this subject. This means that the pace required to teach the curriculum is such that the achievement of some lower attaining pupils is restricted. Reinforcement of previous learning at the start of each lesson, together with clear planning and good classroom management, helps pupils to build on their knowledge and to acquire new skills. They are challenged and encouraged to think for themselves and to undertake their own research, particularly in Key Stage 3. Pupils' positive attitudes to their work, together with their enthusiasm for learning and the very good relationships they make with each other and with their teachers, contribute to their success. Most teachers mark pupils' work thoroughly, often adding carefully worded comments that help pupils to understand how well they are achieving and what they need to do in order to improve. Individual help received in lessons, occasionally with extra support from learning assistants, enables pupils with special educational needs to make good progress. For example, in a good ICT lesson in Year 6, all pupils used CD ROMs to find population statistics on Kenya and the United Kingdom. Those with special educational needs were able to use this information successfully to understand vital differences in levels of development between these two countries.

100. Teaching is satisfactory in Key Stage 2, good in Key Stage 3 and good overall. In both key stages four-fifths of the lessons observed were satisfactory or better, but the very good teaching seen in Key Stage 3 was not present in Key Stage 2. One unsatisfactory lesson was observed in both key stages. In one of these lessons learning opportunities were lost because too much time was devoted to a task without clear direction and in the other there was a lack of challenge for higher attaining pupils. Teachers share learning objectives with pupils and most lessons proceed at a good pace in a calm, orderly atmosphere. In this way, clear and unimpeded progress takes place. The careful use of resources extends pupils' learning. For example, in a good lesson in Year 8, pupils were able to enjoy and appreciate the reasons for change in the village life of southern Italy. Pupils with special educational needs are sometimes given material which has been adapted for their use which helps to consolidate their learning. Teachers encourage pupils to exchange views and ideas, thus enabling them to reach higher levels of understanding and to learn from each other. Progress is monitored carefully by the use of a series of assessment tasks at regular intervals. In Key Stage 3, a clear display in the classroom shows pupils how to reach higher levels of attainment. Information from assessment results is not yet used to adapt schemes of work or to plan lessons. The use of computers was only seen in one lesson during the inspection. Good opportunities for learning of this nature are not yet available for most pupils during geography lessons.

101. The head of subject provides satisfactory leadership and management. The day-to-day management of the subject is good despite the large number of teachers involved and the lack of opportunities for full meetings of all teachers of geography. Generous help is given to non-specialist teachers to enable them to appreciate the standards of work required. Since the last inspection, good progress has been made on the need for greater challenge to the most able pupils and the need for better co-ordination of the subject throughout the school. Priorities now are to update the departmental handbook and to complete schemes of work in the light of recent curriculum changes, paying particular attention to the inclusion of opportunities for learning through the varied use of ICT. The implementation of a rigorous programme of monitoring and evaluating teachers' performance throughout the department will help to eradicate inconsistencies in teaching and to build on the high standards that have been established.

HISTORY

102. The standards reached by pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 match those expected for pupils of a similar age. This is shown in the National Curriculum teacher assessments over the last two years and in the work of pupils currently in Year 6 working towards the end of the key stage. By the time pupils reach the end of Year 8, standards are above those expected at this point of Key Stage 3. At both key stages most pupils have good historical knowledge and understanding which they use well in investigation and in providing descriptions and explanations. The exception to this is the knowledge and understanding of the lower ability pupils at Key Stage 2 who sometimes work at a very superficial level and show very limited understanding. The majority of pupils have good observation skills and make good use of texts and pictorial evidence to gain information and form substantiated conclusions, for example, about characteristics of societies and events. At Key Stage 3 they are also confident in the use of historical sources in carrying out investigations, but skills in the analysis and interrogation of sources are less well developed at Key Stage 2. The great majority of pupils have a good grasp of chronology and well developed levels of empathy.

103. Pupils' achievement, including that of pupils with special educational needs, is satisfactory at Key Stage 2 and good at Key Stage 3. Higher attaining pupils develop good skills of argument and reasoning at Key Stage 3. The majority of pupils become increasingly confident in the identification and presentation of information. Written work develops well with especially good progress made from Key Stage 2 onwards in the development of well-structured extended writing. Lower attaining pupils make less progress in improving their writing especially at Key Stage 2. Their work is less detailed, sometimes copied from books and sometimes unfinished. The majority of pupils, however, make very good use of their literacy skills in their work in history to express themselves fluently and cogently both in speaking and writing. They also use their numeracy skills well both to calculate and present trends and patterns, and at Key Stage 3 especially, their skills in ICT to carry out research and to present their work effectively.

104. Pupils' learning is very well supported by their high levels of interest and motivation. Many are avid learners and are very keen to succeed and to take initiative in their learning even when the opportunities for them to do so in lessons are limited. Their work at Key Stage 3 is often mature and thoughtful. They respond very well to high expectations and challenge in the teaching.

105. Teaching is good. In the lessons seen during the inspection it was good or better in over half and this included some which was very good and on one occasion, excellent. None of the teaching seen was unsatisfactory. Teaching was strongest at Key Stage 3 where pupils' learning benefits from the teachers' good subject expertise which enables pupils to acquire good historical skills in addition to good knowledge and understanding. At Key Stage 2 teachers' subject knowledge is satisfactory in helping pupils to develop knowledge and understanding, but is less strong in promoting the development of historical skills especially in the critical use of sources in their learning. At best, lessons are well planned to ensure appropriate pace and challenge. Techniques, such as questioning, are used to good effect, not only to check understanding but to challenge and extend pupils' thinking

106. In many lessons, especially at Key Stage 3, pupils work at full stretch in response to the teachers' high expectations. For instance, in a Year 7 lesson they worked with enthusiasm and great interest in analysing the evidence about Leighton Buzzard in the Domesday Survey. They interrogated the evidence, posed questions and explored issues in depth. Higher ability pupils especially relish challenge and become bored when not fully involved in their learning and the pace of activities is too slow. This was evident, for instance, in a Year 8 lesson about the North American Indians, when for much of the time the pupils worked well sustained by their own interest in the topic, but eventually became restless, bored and inattentive because too much direction and control by the teacher meant that too little was asked of them in exploring issues for themselves.

107. Where teaching is most effective there are good opportunities for pupils to take initiative in their learning through working productively together in pairs and groups. They respond well to these opportunities as was shown in a Year 8 lesson where pupils worked very effectively in groups in discussing, empathising and learning in depth about the effects of the white settlers on the North American Indians.

108. Pupils' work is assessed regularly against National Curriculum levels but teachers' assessments are not always secure. Moderation arrangements are insufficiently rigorous to ensure consistency and a good correlation with National Curriculum levels. Insufficient attention is given to ensuring that assessment forms an integral part of learning and is used effectively to match work well to pupils' learning needs. At present where different tasks are set for pupils of different attainment levels, they often only vary in terms of being easier as opposed to being specifically designed to help pupils to learn. For example, at Key Stage 2 tasks of little learning value are often set for lower attaining pupils such as cutting and pasting pictures into exercise books which occupy them but do relatively little to further their learning.

109. The current arrangements for the leadership of history, in the absence of a head of subject, are satisfactory in providing for day-to-day organisation. But there are no clear and well-founded systems for strategic forward planning, ensuring consistency in practice across both key stages, and support for the many teachers who teach history. Schemes of work lack coherence and do not give sufficient support and guidance especially for teaching strategies and assessment. The current development plan is insufficiently strategic to ensure that provision is kept under review, and key areas requiring development are identified and developed. Both the need for greater co-ordination and improved development planning were identified as key issues at the last inspection and have not been addressed.

110. The lack of consistency in provision combined with the adverse effects of the limited time available for the subject at Key Stage 2 is resulting in pupils doing less well at Key Stage 2 than at Key Stage 3. To address this issue attention needs to be given at Key Stage 2 to the need for a greater focus on the development of historical skills, a better match of work to pupils' learning requirements, improved arrangements for the moderation of assessment and for the time allocated for history. At both key stages there is a need to ensure appropriately high challenge; improve schemes of work, and the quality of leadership and management of the subject.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

111. Information and communication technology is taught to Year 5 and 6 pupils. Year 7 and 8 pupils develop their ICT skills and usage through other subject areas.

112. Pupils' achievement in ICT is satisfactory at both key stages. Inspection evidence suggests it could be higher in Key Stage 3 if the provision was better co-ordinated. Pupils enter the school with attainment levels that are in line with the national levels for pupils of the same age. Teachers' assessments at the end of Key Stage 2 in 1999 were below national expectations. Approximately three-quarters of the year group gained level 3 and a quarter level 4. To be in line with the national average, a majority should gain level 4. However, evidence from lessons observed indicates that the current Year 6 are achieving in line with pupils of a similar age. The 1999 teachers' assessments of Year 8 ICT capability were below the standard expected of pupils a similar age. A small minority gained level 5 whilst the majority were awarded levels 3 and 4. Well over a third of the Year 8 group in 2000 were assessed at level 5 with a few at level 6. This shows a gradual improvement over the two years. Inspection confirms that the present Year 8 are achieving standards in ICT which are similar to those expected nationally. Pupils with special educational needs make good progress throughout the school, especially when helped by the able classroom support teacher.

113. Year 5 pupils use a range of icons from the software to produce decorated labels and a content sheet for their ICT folders. Year 6 pupils are effectively working in groups to produce a newspaper covering a wide range of school activities thereby using a variety of ICT skills. Through English lessons pupils develop their desktop publishing skills to write articles about Romeo and Juliet and Macbeth in Year 7 and 8. They use the Internet competently in several subject areas to research information, for example, in religious education, pupils found out about different religions and customs. In a geography lesson the class successfully used CD ROM and the Internet to research life in Kenya, and to communicate with a Kenyan school. In science, they use new pocket notebooks to record changes in light intensity and pulse rates, and they could confidently explain and interpret the graphical representations. In mathematics, pupils use ICT in a project to record information from the public about how to use local derelict land. All abilities make good progress in Key Stage 2. Higher attaining pupils can quickly access a range of tools and produce very effective and attractive ICT folders. Average and lower attainers are able to use the keyboard successfully and confidently. Pupils with special educational needs generally make good progress, especially when supported.

114. The teaching observed was good; the teachers seen were confident in using ICT and support pupils effectively. The lessons are planned to develop pupils' ICT capability and to maximise its use for matters relating to their own interests. In Year 8 design and technology lessons, pupils are shown examples of how computers are used in industry. The satisfactory standards achieved are as a result of expert guidance, good use of support material and very well planned lessons. The management of pupils is generally good and good progress is often made because the class teacher and the support teacher work together effectively to solve technical problems. Assessment is an integral part of planning and teaching in Year 5 and 6, but only English and mathematics contribute to the overall assessment of pupils' ICT capability at the end of Year 8. Not all teachers have yet gained competent ICT skills and therefore some classes may well not receive the same experiences in ICT.

115. Pupils of all ages enjoy the lessons and are often excited by what they have achieved and the new techniques they have learned. Potentially troublesome pupils are very well motivated and show good concentration in lessons. Although pupils work well in pairs, they are also very capable of working independently. A group of Year 8 pupils is currently attending an after-school club that intends to produce a substantial newspaper for circulation at the end of term. Previous newspapers produced by Year 8 have been of a high quality.

116. The amount of curriculum time given to Key Stage 2 is satisfactory. However, the teaching of ICT across the curriculum at Key Stage 3 lacks co-ordination. This means that pupils have different and unequal learning experiences. English and mathematics meet the requirements. In other subjects such as science, design and technology and religious studies, the ICT capability is not assessed or recorded and opportunities for pupils to gain higher levels of attainment are sometimes missed. Management of ICT at Key Stage 2 is satisfactory, however, at Key Stage 3 the management of pupils' access to learning and assessment is unsatisfactory.

117. Government funding is being used effectively to develop further the teachers' skills in ICT and help departments to provide appropriate software. Resources have improved in the past two years, though the teaching rooms are small. The links with the contributory Lower schools and the Upper school have developed continuity of teaching of skills and understanding. Heads of subject have met to discuss the moderation of work, but it is recognised that more liaison is required for the new curriculum 2000. Monitoring by the senior management team has resulted in subsequent modifications, which have had a greater impact on learning. The pace of the lessons is generally good and the balance of instruction and activity is well managed. Occasionally the sharing of equipment has resulted in inequality of access for the pupils.

118. Since the last inspection, good technical support has been provided. Discrete lessons have been introduced in Year 5 and 6 but not in Years 7 and 8. There is still insufficient structure in the planning, monitoring and assessing of pupils' ICT experiences in Year 7 and 8 to ensure that all requirements of the National Curriculum are taught to all pupils. The assessment and moderation of pupils' work from a wider range of subjects at Key Stage 3 is also required.

MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES (French)

119. In addition to being taught in Key Stage 3 as a compulsory foundation subject, French is also taught in Years 5 and 6. The time allocated over the four years is the equivalent of what is usually found in the first two years of a secondary school.

120. The standards reached by Year 8 are in line with national expectations. Achievement, by the end of Key Stage 2, is barely satisfactory, since the teaching lacks urgency; it is better in Key Stage 3, where demands are greater. Unless a learning assistant is present, pupils with special educational needs have no specific provision and their progress is haphazard.

121. Listening skills are slow to develop in Key Stage 2, since pupils do not hear enough French and the French they do hear is frequently accompanied by English. By Year 8, standards are higher and pupils understand short passages spoken at near normal speed. Pronunciation and intonation are good at all levels of attainment when the language that the pupils are using is familiar. This is due, in part, to the good use made of French songs as an aid to pronunciation. By Year 8, pupils are able to take part in brief exchanges, using memorised material but their ability to adapt and combine the material is limited. They make many errors and use anglicisms. The level of reading skills is good. Pupils are introduced to graded French readers and are capable of understanding and selecting information from increasingly demanding texts. Average and lower-attaining pupils make commensurate progress. The amount of writing in Years 5 and 6 is limited and consists mainly of copying vocabulary and simple structures to do with greetings, personal information and their homes. A few higher attainers are able to adapt learned material to write a few lines about themselves, their homes and their likes and dislikes. In Year 8, higher attaining pupils are able to use a range of structures and the future tense and write about, for example, a visit to Euro-Disney and a diary for the year 2000 without making many errors. For average and lower-attaining pupils there is a narrower range of structure and vocabulary and the writing is less accurate.

122. Attitudes to French are generally positive, particularly when pupils are constantly challenged and the pace of the lesson is brisk. It is noticeable, however, that, when the task set is undemanding and there is no strict time limit, effort decreases and pupils' attention wanders. Behaviour is usually good. Pupils take care over the presentation of their work.

123. Teaching in more than a third of the lessons seen was unsatisfactory, and is unsatisfactory overall, particularly in Years 5 and 6. In lessons observed in these two years, teachers' knowledge of French and language teaching techniques was insecure. In some instances, pupils were taught pronunciation, vocabulary and structures which were incorrect. Strengths of the teaching include the use of French songs to reinforce pronunciation, structures and vocabulary and the systematic teaching of reading skills. On the whole, lesson planning does not take account of the different levels of attainment in a class. In a Year 8 lesson, where pupils were required to work out a telephone dialogue in which the participants were making plans to meet, all pupils were given the same sheet of suggestions. There was insufficient help for all but the most able and the task was beyond lower-attaining pupils. Similarly, in a lesson dealing with birthdays and months of the year, all pupils had the same undemanding task of cutting out and ordering the months, and a number failed to get beyond this onto the second more demanding task. A further task, which would have been suitable for higher attainers, was not introduced until the end when it was too late. For the most part, French is not used sufficiently for communication, and is sometimes accompanied by the English translation, with the result that pupils do not develop listening skills as well as they might. In the same way, insufficient use is made of the visual image to convey meaning without recourse to English, with the result that English comes between the idea and the French word.

124. The curriculum for French is satisfactory and is currently being updated in the light of the new regulations. Given the time available, some of the work currently being taught in Years 7 and 8 may have to be included for Years 5 and 6. Although the scheme of work deals with pupils with special educational needs, in practice there is no special provision, unless a learning assistant happens to be present. Similarly, although able pupils were selected to attend a special summer school, no provision is made for them in normal lessons. In the scheme of work, account is taken of the use of ICT, but as yet this has not been implemented. Written work is marked regularly but whilst there are sometimes words of encouragement, there are few comments designed to indicate how the work can be improved. Assessments take place at regular intervals and the results are stored centrally. The department analyses the results but more needs to be done to set individual targets in the light of these assessments and to modify the curriculum.

125. The head of subject is very hard working and gives good support to her colleagues. She monitors the work of the department but needs to do so more rigorously in order to raise the level of teaching skills of all her colleagues. Not all teachers are well qualified and this has an impact on the standards of work of the pupils. Resources and accommodation are adequate. There has been little improvement since the last inspection. In order to raise standards the improvement of the quality of lesson planning is a priority so that pupils are given tasks and materials matched to their abilities. The raising of teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve, particularly during Key Stage 2, and more consistent use of French for classroom communication are further requirements.

MUSIC

126. Standards of attainment in music by pupils at the age of 11 and by pupils in Year 8 are above the nationally expected levels.

127. The attainment of pupils in Year 5 when they enter the school matches nationally expected levels. Pupils enjoy the subject, concentrating and co-operating well. Throughout the following two years they achieve well as a result of careful planning, clear objectives and the imaginative presentation of information in lessons. By singing a nonsense song in a variety of ways pupils in Year 5 understood the different elements of music; Year 6 pupils, by first working with 'silent' keyboards, were given the opportunity to recognise the shape and internalise the sound of the C major chord before using an electronic keyboard to experiment with ideas for a fanfare. Pupils in Years 5 and 6 perform confidently, can follow single line scores, listen well and use subject language correctly when discussing music they hear or are composing. They sing enthusiastically.

128. Pupils continue to make good progress and achieve well throughout Years 7 and 8, learning to value their creative ideas and abilities and developing a secure base of musical knowledge. They play a limited range of notes on keyboards with increasing fluency and understand staff notation. Pupils in Year 8, studying blues, were able to improvise on the blues scale using both orchestral instruments and keyboards, and could explain features such as riffs, fills and chord progressions. Several pupils sang the words they had written with an appropriate sense of style. Most pupils develop increasing independence in composing and in performing alone and in groups, and pupils of higher ability compose attractive melodies with interesting rhythmic patterns to a given chord sequence. Pupils confidently experiment with sound to create imaginative, atmospheric pieces. By being given systematic targets and clear explanations of features to listen for, pupils learn to refine the quality of their work. However, because of the crowded conditions in the classroom which regularly occur because there are no available separate spaces, some pupils have difficulty in hearing their work, make slower progress and become discouraged. Pupils with special educational needs and those who are gifted or talented make very good progress in music.

129. Pupils learn well because the quality of teaching is very good. None of it was less than good. The head of music plans carefully to ensure that pupils build systematically on their previous knowledge and understanding. Wherever possible, pupils learn through practical experience and musical example. Lessons proceed at a lively pace and are delivered in a friendly, humorous manner. The work set provides a suitable challenge for pupils of all abilities, giving them a balanced appreciation of the subject and of their potential within the subject, and careful target-setting helps them to make further progress. Those pupils who have instrumental lessons make good and sometimes very good progress, reflecting their teachers' high level of expertise and their ability to enthuse and encourage.

130. Pupils' experience is greatly enriched by a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Around half the pupils in the school take part in the annual concert, and the many opportunities for performing further afield have included trips to St Edmundsbury Cathedral and the Royal Albert Hall as well as to local venues.

131. The subject is staffed by one specialist teacher and one non-specialist who teaches two lessons per week. The amount of time in direct contact with classes is high, and because so much out-of-school time is allocated to musical activities time for managing the department is limited. Nevertheless she provides good leadership and the department is well organised. Schemes of work provide a rich variety of experience; further breadth could be developed by including more music of a non-western tradition, and depth could be increased by greater consideration of the subject's contribution to pupils' spiritual development. A detailed and informative assessment system is undergoing further refinement to make it more manageable.

132. Since the previous inspection the improvement both in pupils' standards of attainment and in the quality of teaching has been good. However, there has been no improvement in the quality of the accommodation, which is increasingly unsatisfactory for the requirements of the subject. The main teaching room is too small for the numbers of pupils and the amount of equipment it contains, and because of the lack of suitable separate spaces noise congestion is a serious problem. The quality of pupils' work is adversely affected and their progress restricted because they cannot hear their ideas properly and have difficulty in developing discrimination. Resources also remain unsatisfactory. There is insufficient access to ICT to fulfil the requirements of the National Curriculum in music, and the condition of much of the tuned percussion is poor.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

133. In lessons, the majority of 11 year olds attain well in terms of the expectations for their age and are on course to achieve standards above those expected for their age by the end of Key Stage 2. In netball, for example, girls signal appropriately and then check and pivot well when receiving a pass. In rugby union, boys' basic handling and passing skills are well developed. In the Auckland grid exercise, for example, many pass with accuracy whilst on the move.

134. In lessons, by the end of Year 8, the achievement of the majority of pupils is satisfactory and pupils are on course to achieve appropriate levels at the end of Key Stage 3. In hockey, for example, girls are developing well their decision-making skills in one-to-one attacking play. Meanwhile boys, for example, in rugby union, display secure all-round skills in passing and handling in small group exercises. In gymnastics girls are developing well their sequence work to include aspects of both flight and balance using a good range of apparatus. However, the achievement of boys in gymnastics is less than expected for their age. The negative attitudes and behaviour of a significant minority means they are not making the progress they should be. The quality and standards of their floor work, for example, are not well developed. Take-off and landing techniques lack poise and flexibility in moving is lacking.

135. Across all years, pupils have a secure understanding of the procedures for warm-up and in some lessons take responsibility, for example, in leading their own stretches. Older pupils name the muscle groups being stretched. Although no pupils identified as having special educational needs were observed with additional help, they are well supported, integrated and make good progress.

136. Overall, the quality of teaching is satisfactory. No unsatisfactory teaching was observed but there are inconsistencies in the overall quality. Three lessons were not taught by the specialist teacher nevertheless the quality of these was satisfactory. There is no significant difference in the overall quality of teaching across the years where the full-time subject specialists teach pupils. Teachers have high expectations in terms of discipline and behaviour and in the ability of pupils to work to their best. Pupils, whose attitudes are positive, respond well. This helps to promote a positive learning atmosphere in most lessons, as does the willingness of the great majority to work in pairs and small groups. Those who drift off task are swiftly challenged by teachers, which is indicative of their good management skills and limits the impact of negative behaviour on the learning of others. The teacher effectively did this in a Year 8 rugby union lesson where one or two potentially challenging pupils were present. Teachers ensure pupils are aware of what is expected of them at the start of lessons and break down and demonstrate required skills and techniques well, thus ensuring pupils know further what they have to do to make progress. This was, for example, done effectively in a Year 6 netball lesson when introducing the bounce pass. In all lessons teachers use a variety of planned and structured activities, which ensure pupils remain motivated and stay on task. They also circulate well to offer praise and constructive criticism during these activities thus ensuring pupils are becoming aware of their capabilities.

137. There are, though, inconsistencies in teaching which if addressed, would improve the overall quality of the pupils' learning experiences. Pupils are not always fully involved in taking responsibility for aspects of their own learning. The very good practice observed in a Year 8 girls' gymnastics lesson was not used in a Year 8 girls' hockey lesson. In the latter, pupils were simply shown how to pass a player on the non-stick side as opposed to being asked to plan and develop their own ideas and then evaluate the effectiveness of their ideas. Similarly, in a Year 5 boys' rugby union lesson the pupils were simply set a range of skills drills to complete and were not offered the responsibility of being involved in peer evaluation in order to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the principles of passing.

138. The curriculum is broad and balanced and meets the requirements of the National Curriculum. The gender issue raised at the last inspection has been addressed, boys and girls now follow the same areas of activity and some classes are now mixed. A very good range of extra-curricular activities further extends the learning experiences of pupils. As a result of the dedication and enthusiasm of physical education teachers, some individual pupils have achieved representative honours at district level in athletics. Procedures for the newly introduced assessment levels in the subject are fully in place and schemes of work have been refined to match the new requirements. The quality of accommodation is good and enables a good range of games and activities to be taught. However, shower facilities do not provide the privacy expected by pupils – this has a negative impact on standards of hygiene.

139. Since the last inspection the head of subject has provided effective leadership and management. However, there has been insufficient formal monitoring and evaluation of teaching, thus the sharing and development of good practice is not yet a consistent or well established practice. There is also room for improvement in addressing further the issue raised at the last inspection of involving pupils more in aspects of planning, performing and evaluation in lessons and linking this to assessment.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

140. Pupils come into the school with standards in religious education which are above those which are set out in the Bedfordshire Agreed Syllabus. Pupils have a basic knowledge and understanding of some religious beliefs and Bible stories. They also have a developing understanding of significant experiences that affect their own lives.

141. By the end of Key Stage 2, pupils have made good progress and they achieve a very good level of knowledge and understanding matched against the expectations set out in the Bedfordshire Agreed Syllabus. All pupils have a well-developed knowledge and understanding of a range of religions. Higher and middle attaining pupils are able to discuss and write about issues of a religious and ethical nature with confidence and maturity. During the inspection week, interesting and reflective pieces of work were seen in which pupils considered aspects of symbolism and creation stories. Higher attaining pupils write accurately and in detail. Lower attaining pupils can also express their ideas clearly, although they produce less developed pieces of writing. Almost all pupils take a pride in their work. Pupils with special educational needs make good progress. This is helped by teachers' careful lesson planning which highlights what all pupils should achieve during the lesson.

142. When pupils leave the school to go on to the Upper school at the end of Year 8, the majority of pupils are on target to achieve levels at the end of the key stage well above the expectations of the Bedfordshire Agreed Syllabus. They have good insights into different religious beliefs, and can write confidently about spiritual and ethical issues such as 'worship' and 'rites of passage'.

143. Pupils have positive attitudes to learning. In lessons observed pupils were attentive and conscientious. In a Year 5 lesson, pupils were thinking about creation stories, and pondering how religious beliefs can provide answers to universal questions. They were involved in the work, were eager to answer questions and took the work seriously. Their positive attitudes enabled them to make good gains in spiritual insights.

144. Teaching overall is good, and in three out of seven lessons seen was very good. When teaching is good or better, teachers plan interesting, challenging work and have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They also draw out for pupils what they need to do in order to achieve particular assessment levels. In one lesson observed, Year 5 pupils were considering very deep, profound 'universal' questions. The teacher used questioning techniques very effectively to check what pupils understood. The teacher had prepared some interesting, challenging resources, which pupils responded to very well. They had to consider mysterious questions arising out of looking at 'perception' pictures which test the way we look at things. The teacher's careful lesson planning and selection of resources contributed to the pupils making very good gains in knowledge and understanding. In another lesson, Year 8 pupils were doing research from the Internet on Sikhism. The teacher's very clear planning and her explanations of what pupils needed to do in order to achieve level 4, and how that could be improved in order to achieve a level 5 or 6, helped pupils to make good progress in the lesson.

145. The curriculum in religious education is very good. Schemes of work are well planned to reflect the aims of the Bedfordshire Agreed Syllabus. Pupils are encouraged to explore religious faiths and traditions and respect for others' beliefs are fostered. The head of subject has identified the fact that the section in the syllabus in which pupils learn about ethical and spiritual issues from the major faiths gives particular opportunities for the most able pupils to be challenged and stretched. The department organises visits to local places of worship and presentations by visitors coming into school, to extend and enrich pupils' learning.

146. The subject makes a very good contribution to pupils' spiritual development. In one lesson observed, Year 7 pupils were looking at Christian baptisms and exploring the approaches and beliefs of different denominations. The teacher was insistent that pupils respect the beliefs of others. In work seen during inspection week, there were very good examples of empathic writing, for example, pupils sending 'a post card from Mecca' to a friend, or a letter describing experiences attending a Sikh festival.

147. Pupils' work is helpfully marked by teachers who write appreciative comments on good work, and identify areas for improvement where necessary. Assessment levels are explained to pupils, so that they know what they have to do in order to attain a higher level. The department is beginning to acquire useful assessment data through a computer generated package which is being used to set targets for individuals and groups of pupils. With more information over time, this will become increasingly useful to set specific targets.

148. The head of subject provides very effective leadership. Since she took up the post two years ago, very helpful procedures have been put in place for assessing pupils' attainment against level descriptors in the Bedfordshire Agreed Syllabus. She has a large team of non-specialists, and successfully co-ordinates their work, through a system of formal and informal meetings and lesson monitoring. Schemes of work have been extensively revised and the use of ICT is included where appropriate to develop pupils' learning. All these initiatives have contributed to standards rising since the last inspection and the very good progress made since then. Schemes of work have been thoroughly revised and resources developed. There are now far more opportunities for pupils to develop their research and enquiry skills through project-based assignments in which pupils use a range of resources including CD ROMs and the Internet. Links have been developed with local faith communities, for example, pupils visit the Sikh Gurdwara in Bedford, and these help to bring the subject to life for the pupils. The department is well placed to improve even further.