INSPECTION REPORT

THE FIRS LOWER SCHOOL

Ampthill

Bedfordshire

Unique reference number: 109520

Headteacher: Mrs Therese Mostowfi

Reporting inspector: Dr Brian Male 14906

Dates of inspection: 3-4 March 2003

Inspection number: 246917

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Type of school: First

School category: Community

Age range of pupils: 4-9

Gender of pupils: Mixed

School address: Station Road

Ampthill

Bedford

Postcode: MK45 2QR

Telephone number: 01525 402735

Fax number: 01525 755881

Appropriate authority: The governing body

Name of chair of governors: Mr Ben Sear

Date of previous inspection: 26 January 1998

INFORMATION ABOUT THE INSPECTION TEAM

Team members				
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18170	Mrs P Houghton-Hill	Team inspector		

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PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

This community first school takes pupils from four to nine years old, and is maintained by Bedfordshire County Council. At the time of the inspection there were 251 full time pupils in 10 classes. Many pupils start school with standards of attainment well above those usually found. The percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is well below the national average. The percentage of pupils identified as having special educational needs is below the national average. There are very few pupils from an ethnic minority or for whom English is an additional language.

HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS

This is a very good school where pupils attain high standards. There has been a remarkable trend of such high standards over a number of years. These standards are underpinned by the quality of the teaching and the pupils' very positive attitudes to school. The headteacher and senior staff have created a very positive ethos that includes all pupils, and have set high standards. There are particularly good systems for setting targets and promoting good progress. The school provides very good value for money.

What the school does well

- Standards of attainment across the school are well above average, especially in English, mathematics, art and information technology.
- Pupils behave very well and have very positive attitudes to school.
- The quality of teaching is good overall with a significant amount of very good and excellent teaching.
- The systems for assessment and target setting are very effective.
- The standard of art work and the quality of display in the school are very high.
- There is an exceptionally wide range of extra-curricular activities.
- The headteacher, senior staff and governors provide very effective leadership for the school.

The next steps for the school

• The range of learning strategies in which pupils are involved could be extended in some lessons.

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

The area for development is a matter of 'fine-tuning' what is already very good provision.

HOW THE SCHOOL HAS IMPROVED SINCE ITS LAST INSPECTION

The school was last inspected in January 1998, and has made very good progress since then. Standards of attainment have risen significantly and are now well above average. Pupils' attitudes and behaviour have improved, and are now very good. The quality of teaching has also improved and is now good overall. All the key issues raised by the previous inspection have been addressed most thoroughly, to the extent that assessment is now a particular strength. The headteacher continues to provide very effective leadership, and this underpins the progress the school has made. The school has a very good capacity to improve and is well placed to continue its trend of high standards.

STANDARDS OF ATTAINMENT

The table shows the standards achieved by seven year olds based on average point scores in National Curriculum tests.

	compared with				
Performance in:	;	similar schools			
	2000	2001	2002	2002	
Reading	A	A	A	В	
Writing	A	A	A	A	
Mathematics	A	A	A	A	

Key	
very high	A*
well above average	Α
above average	В
average	C
below average	D
well below average	E
very low	E*

The school's scores in national tests for seven year olds in 2002 were well above the national average in all three aspects. These scores were also well above the average of similar schools in writing and mathematics, and very marginally outside that category in reading. To be ranked so highly against similar schools is a significant achievement, and there has been a remarkably consistent trend of such standards over the last four years. Such standards represent very good achievement for the pupils.

Inspection evidence suggests that standards at the end of Year 2 are even higher this year. Standards in English and mathematics are also well above average when pupils leave school at the end of Year 4. It is not possible to make judgements on all subjects during a 'short' inspection, but it is evident that standards are also well above average in art and information technology.

There is good progress through the Foundation Stage, with almost all children attaining the nationally expected 'Early Learning Goals' long before they move into Year 1.

The high standards are underpinned by the good quality of teaching, and the pupils' very positive attitudes to learning. The school sets challenging targets and has been very successful in meeting them.

PUPILS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	Pupils have very good attitudes to school. They are very positive in their approach, and are very confident learners.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	Pupils behave very well in lessons. They are polite and respectful of adults. There are very good standards of behaviour in the playground and around the school.
Personal development and relationships	Relationships are very good across the school. Pupils are thoughtful and considerate, and concerned about others.
Attendance	The rate of attendance is well above the national average.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of pupils in:	Reception	Years 1 – 2	Years 3 – 4	
Quality of teaching	Good	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.

The quality of teaching is good across the school and there is a significant amount of very good and excellent teaching. This is a significant improvement since the previous inspection, and underpins the high standards that pupils attain. Teachers work very hard and are very concerned for the welfare of their pupils as individuals. Teaching assistants make a very valuable contribution to learning.

Where teaching is best, there are very high expectations and a sense of excitement in lessons. In these lessons, there is a high intellectual challenge that promotes quick progress and develops pupils' concepts well. Well-planned activities support learning and give pupils the practical experiences that are needed to underpin understanding.

Although teaching is never less than satisfactory, some lessons could have more variety and interest by involving pupils in a wider range of learning styles that extend understanding and vary the pace of learning.

The basic skills of literacy and numeracy are very well taught across the school. There is some very good support for pupils who have special educational needs that enables them to make good progress.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum	The curriculum is broad and balanced, and provides well for the development of the pupils. There is good emphasis on the basic skills of literacy and numeracy together with good provision for the range of other subjects. There is a particularly wide range of extra-curricular activities.
Provision for pupils with special educational needs	There is very good provision for these pupils, with some very good support from learning support assistants. Individual education plans have helpful targets, and the national Code of Practice is implemented effectively.
Provision for pupils' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	There is very good provision in this area, particularly in terms of pupils' moral and social development. There is a particularly thoughtful approach to the multi-cultural aspects.
How well the school cares for its pupils	Pupils are very well cared for within a very supportive environment. The school is very effective in promoting good relationships between all pupils. There are some very effective arrangements for assessing pupils' attainment and progress, and for setting targets. These targets are used effectively for determining what pupils need to learn next.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff	The headteacher is very effective in her leadership and management of the school. She sets a very good tone and has established a very positive ethos. She is very well supported by the deputy headteacher and senior subject managers.
How well the governors fulfil their responsibilities	The governors make a particularly effective contribution to the running of the school. They have a particularly good overview of the school, and take a very active part in its activities.
The school's evaluation of its performance	The school is taking many very effective steps to monitor and evaluate its performance. A very wide range of data is analysed very rigorously, and targets set from the analysis. This is an outstanding feature of the school's management.
The strategic use of resources	The school makes very effective use of its resources. The budget is managed very effectively, and last year's budget surplus was accrued in order to pay for the new building. The school applies the principles of best value appropriately.

PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What parents would like to see improved		
 The progress made by pupils and the standards attained. The quality of teaching and support for pupils. The standards of behaviour. 	There is no area where a significant number of parents would like to see improvement.		
 The way the school is open and approachable. The way the school is led and managed. That children like going to school. 			

Parents were very supportive indeed of the school in their meeting with inspectors and in their replies to the questionnaire. The inspection team agrees with all their positive comments.

PART B: COMMENTARY

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

Standards of attainment across the school are well above average, particularly in English, mathematics, art and information technology.

- 1. The school's scores in national tests for seven year olds in 2002 were well above the national average in all three aspects tested: reading, writing and mathematics. These scores were also well above the average of similar schools in writing and mathematics, and very marginally outside that category in reading. To be ranked so highly against similar schools is a significant achievement, and there has been a remarkably consistent trend of such standards over the last four years. Such standards represent very good achievement for the pupils.
- 2. Inspection evidence suggests that standards at the end of Year 2 are even higher this year. Standards in English and mathematics are also well above average when pupils leave school at the end of Year 4. By the end of Year 2, almost all pupils attain the expected level (Level 2) and a much higher than average proportion attain the higher level (Level 3) in all three aspects. By the end of Year 4, most pupils are already working at the level expected of eleven year olds in both English and mathematics.
- 3. Standards in the speaking and listening aspect of English are high across the school. Even the youngest pupils are able to express themselves clearly and talk with confidence. For example, reception class children were able to discuss their art work in detail, and Year 1 pupils to explain their theories of gravity very well indeed in a science lesson. By the end of Year 4, pupils are able to discuss more complex ideas and make their meaning clear to the listener.
- 4. Standards of reading are also high across the school. The youngest children take a great interest in books and understand the structures of stories. For example, Year 1 pupils were able to recognise the different features of traditional tales when reading John Prater's "Once Upon a Time". By the end of Year 4 most pupils are not only able to read fluently but have also developed a more sophisticated understanding of literature, and can look for meanings beyond the literal. For example, Year 4 pupils reading Ted Hughes' "The Iron Man" were able to quote from the text to support the interpretations that they were making. In both the above examples, the teachers' high expectations and very good questioning enabled pupils to attain the higher levels.
- 5. Standards in mathematics are well above average. The youngest pupils count and sort with confidence and gain a good grounding in practical experiences that underpins later concepts. By the end of Year 2, pupils have a very good understanding of number, and a good recall of number facts. This is built on well through Years 3 and 4. There is also very good understanding of other aspects such as data handling, shape and measures. For example, some Year 2 pupils sorting shapes in a 'Venn Diagram' were very quick to spot that a red triangle should be in both the set of red things and the set of triangles, and that the circles should be overlapped to make this happen. It was the way in which the teacher's very well prepared lesson built up the pupils' understanding so carefully through the use of a number of triangles and red shapes before introducing the red triangle that made the understanding so clear.

6. It is not possible to make judgements on all subjects during a 'short' inspection, but it is evident that standards are also well above average in art and information technology. Pupils use the facilities of the computer room with confidence and a great deal of skill. There has been a particularly effective focus on the 'measurement and control' aspect of the National Curriculum requirements of the subject with a great deal of work on robotics.

Pupils behave very well and have very positive attitudes to school.

- 7. Pupils have very good attitudes to school. They are very positive in their approach, and are very confident learners. This confidence comes from the good relationships that pupils have with their teachers, and from the way that pupils' contributions to lessons are valued. This means that pupils are seldom afraid to try new ideas or to make suggestions. Even the youngest pupils sustain their concentration well and are willing to amend and improve their work. For example, children in the reception class were willing to add to their collage pictures of robots in order to improve them.
- 8. Pupils show a very good sense of commitment to lessons and to extra-curricular activities. They think carefully about their contributions, and take account of what others have said. They are very persistent in their work, and are keen to do well.
- 9. The good relationships that prevail through the school also underpin the very good standards of behaviour. Pupils have a good sense of responsibility and behave very well in lessons and around the school. They are friendly and polite, and very considerate of others.

The quality of teaching is good overall with a significant amount of very good and excellent teaching.

- 10. The quality of teaching is good across the school and there is a significant amount of very good and excellent teaching. This is a significant improvement since the previous inspection, and underpins the high standards that pupils attain. Teachers work very hard and are very concerned for the welfare of their pupils as individuals. Teaching assistants make a significant contribution to learning.
- 11. Where teaching is best, there are very high expectations and a sense of excitement in lessons. In these lessons, there is a high intellectual challenge that promotes quick progress and develops pupils' concepts well. For example, there was a particularly high level of challenge in an excellent Year 1 science lesson where pupils were asked to use their understanding of the force of gravity from previous lessons to explain the way in which cars rolled down a slope. The practical work in which they had been involved, and the teacher's very clear explanations made it possible for the pupils to meet this high challenge. The rolling cars, and poor Teddy pitching out when the car stopped abruptly, all added to the sense of excitement, but was also used in the teaching: "In which direction did he fall? Why was that?".
- 12. Similarly high expectations were evident in a very good Year 4 English lesson where the teacher's very well directed questions enhanced pupils' understanding and enabled them to reach high levels of attainment by relating their comments to the text, "Yes, but where does it say that in the text?" An excellent introduction to a science lesson with the same class made expectations clear and required pupils to draw upon their

previous learning to extend concepts about electricity. A Year 2 religious education lesson drew similarly well on previous learning as the teacher extended pupils' understanding of the Bible and Torah as religious texts to consider the significance to Muslims of the Qu'ran.

- 13. Well-planned activities support learning and give pupils the practical experiences that are needed to underpin understanding. Mention has already been made of the very good Year 2 mathematics lesson in which the teacher carefully built up the pupils' understanding of a 'Venn Diagram'. Good practical work in the reception classes where children explore a good range of materials and situations gives a firm foundation to the development of later concepts.
- 14. The basic skills of literacy and numeracy are very well taught across the school. There is some very good support for pupils who have special educational needs that enables them to make good progress. All pupils attain the expected level (Level 2) by the end of Year 2.

The systems for assessment and target setting are very effective.

- 15. The school has some very effective systems for assessing pupils' attainment and tracking their progress. This was one of the key issues raised by the previous inspection and particularly good progress has been made on this issue. Teachers have a very good understanding of the requirements of each level of the National Curriculum and the methodology of establishing overall standards in relation to national norms. This enables the school to monitor progress very effectively. At the individual level, it enables teachers to mark pupils' work very well in terms of the precise requirements of the next steps in learning.
- 16. All these data are analysed very rigorously and the analysis used to set targets for the school, for classes and for individuals. These are very effective in maintaining the school's high standards. The individual targets set for pupils are effective as they are mostly of a general nature and can be addressed in a variety of contexts. Pupils are well aware of their targets and take them seriously.

The standard of art work and the quality of display in the school are very high.

- 17. The school has worked hard to create a very attractive and stimulating learning environment, and has been very successful in doing so. Classrooms have been made particularly attractive, and pupils' work is very effectively displayed to create interest and to value pupils' achievements. Posters and displays enhance learning and surround the pupils with a literary environment; this enhances learning in English. Corridors and hallways are also used very effectively to display pupils' work and to set high standards. All of this effort is very worthwhile in creating an ethos in which standards and achievement are important, and this in turn supports pupils' very positive attitudes.
- 18. The standard of art work is exceptionally high across the school. Pupils' work on display and in books shows a very wide range of techniques, styles and media. It also shows particularly good progression as pupils move through the school. Pupils have studied the work of famous artists and have learned about their styles and techniques. All over the school are examples of pupils painting or drawing in the style of artists

such as VanGogh or Monet. Some very lovely sketches by Year 1 pupils of the shapes made by pupils who were wrapped in various fabrics show particularly good technique and control. There are also some rather wonderful three-dimensional fish made of clay by Year 2 pupils, who then painted and glazed them in aptly shiny colours. If any parents reading this report have not seen the range of work on display, they should make their way to the school as soon as possible!

There is an exceptionally wide range of extra-curricular activities.

19. The school is to be commended for the exceptionally wide range of extra-curricular activities that it organises and runs. There is a club to look after children both before and after school every day of the week which many parents find a very valuable facility. There are lunchtime and after school activities in dance, drama, French, music and a range of sports. These activities are run by teachers, parents, teachers and pupils from the local high school and by specialists charging for the activity. The range of activities is much wider than usually found in schools, and greatly enhances the education of the children.

The headteacher, senior staff and governors provide very effective leadership for the school.

- 20. The headteacher is very effective in her leadership and management of the school. She sets a very good tone for the school, and has established a very positive ethos. She has a very good overview of developments and sets a clear educational direction. An outstanding feature of her management is the way in which the school monitors and evaluates its performance. A very wide range of data is analysed very rigorously, and targets set from the analysis. It is these measures that have helped create the high standards that pupils attain. She is very well supported by a very able deputy headteacher and senior subject managers, and together they form a very strong team indeed
- The governors make a particularly effective contribution to the running of the school. They have a particularly good overview of the school, and play a full part in its management, drawing up the very effective development plan, setting the budget, and helping to set the overall strategic direction. The apparent budget surplus has been accrued to pay for the new building. Governors also take a very active part in the school's activities. They are linked very effectively to different areas of the curriculum and take an active part in forming policies. An outstanding feature of the governors' work has been the arranging of subject workshops on Saturdays so that parents can participate in activities along with their children.

The range of learning strategies in which pupils are involved could be extended in some lessons.

22. The quality of teaching is good overall, and there is a significant amount of very good teaching, so any suggestions here are very much in the area of 'fine-tuning' what is already very good provision. In some lessons there is a prevalent learning style of class discussion followed by individual work and then a resume of what has been learned. This is a very effective format and promotes good progress, but variety and interest could be added, and learning enhanced by involving pupils in a wider range of learning styles. There are many lessons in the school where pupils are already

involved in a range of styles, and are engaged in activities such a paired discussion, problem solving and investigation. For example, a Year 3 teacher took the role of Catherine of Aragon so that pupils could find out about her by asking questions. In the same class, pupils made good use of number fans to make individual responses during a whole-class session, and timed, short-burst activities. In a Year 4 science lesson, pupils were given good opportunities to develop their own methods of investigation, rather than following the teacher's instructions. Such strategies add variety and interest to lessons and so enhance learning.

WHAT THE SCHOOL NEEDS TO DO NEXT

23. In order to build on its already high standards, the next steps for the school are to widen the range of pupils' learning experiences and add variety and interest in some lessons through more use of activities such as paired discussion, 'short-burst' activities, and independent approaches to investigating and recording. (See paragraph 22).

PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	26
Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and pupils	13

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

	Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
Number	1	8	11	6	0	0	0
Percentage	4	31	42	23	0	0	0

The table gives the number and percentage of lessons observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about teaching. Care should be taken when interpreting these percentages as each lesson represents more than three percentage points.

Information about the school's pupils

Pupils on the school's roll	Nursery	YR – Y6
Number of pupils on the school's roll (FTE for part-time pupils)	N/A	251
Number of full-time pupils known to be eligible for free school meals	N/A	4

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Special educational needs	Nursery	YR – Y6
Number of pupils with statements of special educational needs	N/A	2
Number of pupils on the school's special educational needs register	N/A	32

English as an additional language	No of pupils
Number of pupils with English as an additional language	4

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No of pupils
Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	16
Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving	15

Attendance

Authorised absence

School data 4.0 National comparative data 5.4

Unauthorised absence

	%
School data	0.0
National comparative data	0.5

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 1 (Year 2)

	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
Number of registered pupils in final year of Key Stage 1 for the latest reporting year	2002	27	22	49

National Curriculum	Test/Task Results	Reading	Writing	Mathematics
	Boys	27	27	27
Numbers of pupils at NC level 2 and above	Girls	22	22	22
	Total	49	49	49
Percentage of pupils	School	100 (96)	100 (95)	100 (98)
at NC level 2 or above	National	84 (84)	86 (86)	90 (91)

Teachers' Ass	essments	English	Mathematics	Science
	Boys	27	25	27
Numbers of pupils at NC level 2 and above	Girls	22	20	22
	Total	49	45	49
Percentage of pupils	School	100 (93)	92 (91)	100 (95)
at NC level 2 or above	National	85 (85)	89 (89)	89 (89)

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

Categories used in the Annual School Census	No. of pupils on roll	No. of fixed period exclusions	No. of permanent exclusions
White – British	168	0	0
White – Irish	2	0	0
White – any other White background	4	0	0
Mixed – White and Black Caribbean	4	0	0
Mixed – White and Black African	1	0	0
Mixed – White and Asian	2	0	0
Mixed – any other mixed background	0	0	0
Asian or Asian British – Indian	2	0	0
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani	0	0	0
Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi	0	0	0
Asian or Asian British – any other Asian background	0	0	0
Black or Black British – Caribbean	0	0	0
Black or Black British – African	0	0	0
Black or Black British – any other Black background	0	0	0
Chinese	1	0	0
Any other ethnic group	0	0	0
No ethnic group recorded	67	0	0

The table refers to pupils of compulsory school age only. It gives the number of exclusions, which may be different from the number of pupils excluded.

Teachers and classes

Qualified teachers and classes: YR - Y6

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	11
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	23.1: 1
Average class size	24

Education support staff: YR - Y6

Total number of education support staff	13
Total aggregate hours worked per week	187.5

Qualified teachers and support staff: nursery

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	N/A
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	N/A
Total number of education support staff	N/A
Total aggregate hours worked per week	N/A
Number of pupils per FTE adult	N/A

 $FTE\ means\ full-time\ equivalent.$

Financial information

Financial year	2001-
	2002

	£
Total income	531819
Total expenditure	516915
Expenditure per pupil	2019
Balance brought forward from previous year	34940
Balance carried forward to next year	49844

Recruitment of teachers

Number of teachers who left the school during the last two years	7
Number of teachers appointed to the school during the last two years	

Total number of vacant teaching posts (FTE)	0
Number of vacancies filled by teachers on temporary contract of a term or more (FTE)	2
Number of unfilled vacancies or vacancies filled by teachers on temporary contract of less than one term (FTE)	0

 $FTE\ means\ full-time\ equivalent.$

Results of the survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out	251
Number of questionnaires returned	95

Percentage of responses in each category

My child likes school.

My child is making good progress in school.

Behaviour in the school is good.

My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.

The teaching is good.

I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.

I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.

The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.

The school works closely with parents.

The school is well led and managed.

The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.

The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.

Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
56	39	5	0	0
51	45	3	0	1
48	51	1	0	0
29	60	11	0	0
54	43	3	0	0
29	49	15	4	2
62	27	5	2	3
55	41	3	0	1
35	51	9	4	1
48	43	3	4	1
53	39	3	0	5
43	42	6	0	9