



**Office for Standards
in Education**

Inspection report
Blurton Primary School

Stoke-on-Trent Education Authority

Dates of inspection: 30 June – 1 July 2004

This inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996 and was deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act

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Basic information about the school

Name of school:	Blurton Primary School
Type of school:	Primary
Status:	Community
Age range of pupils:	3 to 11 years
Headteacher:	Mrs J Luke
Address of school:	Poplar Drive Blurton Stoke-on-Trent Staffordshire ST3 3AZ
Telephone:	01782 235025
Name and address of appropriate authority:	The governing body, address as above
Chair of governors:	Mr D Thorneycroft
Local education authority area:	Stoke-on-Trent
Unique reference number:	124002
Name of reporting inspector:	Mr J F Gornall HMI
Dates of inspection:	30 June – 1 July 2004

Introduction

1. Blurton Primary School is situated in Stoke-on-Trent, in an established area of mainly council-built housing. It is similar in size to most primary schools, with 27 full-time pupils in the nursery, and 235 pupils in the main school divided into nine classes. The school serves a community with recognised socio-economic difficulties. The pupils' attainment on entry to the Foundation Stage is well below average, particularly in their acquisition and use of language. Forty per cent of the pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is more than twice the national figure. Four of the pupils come from homes where English is spoken as an additional language. Ninety of the pupils are identified as having special educational needs; this is well above the national figure. There are two pupils who have a Statement of Special Educational Need. The number of pupils entering the school has fallen over recent years; three of the nine classes provide for mixed ages. The level of pupil mobility is higher than that found in most primary schools; a quarter of the current Year 6 pupils did not join the school in the Foundation Stage, and by mid-way through the current academic year ten per cent of the school's population had changed. Since the time of the previous inspection in March 2002, a new headteacher and deputy headteacher have joined the school; both have been in post for just over a year.

2. The school was inspected in March 2002. The inspection was critical of many aspects of the work of the school and the school was made subject to special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education.

3. The governors drew up an action plan to address the key issues from the inspection of March 2002. The school was visited by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) on five occasions to monitor the progress being made.

4. In June and July 2004 two HMI and one Additional Inspector inspected the school, assessing the standard of education provided and the progress the school has made, in particular in relation to the main findings and key issues in the inspection report of March 2002.

Main findings

5. In accordance with section 14 of the School Inspections Act 1996, I am of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures, since it is now providing an acceptable standard of education for its pupils. The main findings of the inspection are:

- standards are rising because the leadership of the school has a clearer focus on promoting achievement; the quality of teaching and the pupils' attitudes and behaviour have improved and more is being expected of them. Although the pupils are making significantly better progress than at the time of the inspection in 2002, standards overall remain lower than they should be;
- the curriculum for the Foundation Stage is appropriate and its organisation in both the nursery and reception classes has been improved. The pupils make a good start to their education and, by the end of their time in the Foundation Stage, most of them are predicted to achieve the national goals for their age;

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- at both key stages the school's overall performance in national tests has improved. At Key Stage 1, the school's National Curriculum test results for 2004 were higher than those of the previous year in reading, writing and mathematics. At Key Stage 2, the school's National Curriculum test results for 2004 have improved in mathematics and science but have fallen slightly in English;
 - in lessons, attainment overall was below or well below average but the standards pupils were working at varied widely, with a small number of pupils in every class working close to and, in some cases, above age-expected levels. Many of the pupils, however, have underdeveloped speaking and writing skills and some lack confidence when communicating;
 - the pupils make good progress in the Foundation Stage. At Key Stages 1 and 2, the pupils' rate of progress has improved and is mainly satisfactory and occasionally good. The quality of learning was good or better in three quarters of the lessons and satisfactory in one quarter;
 - the pupils' behaviour was good and often very good. Pupils were friendly and polite in lessons and around the school, relating well to each other and to adults. In most year groups, they showed enthusiasm for learning and participated more in lessons than was the case during the previous inspection. The school has improved the rate of attendance; it is similar to the national figure;
 - the provision for the pupils' spiritual, moral and social development is good and that for their cultural development is satisfactory. The ethos of the school is very positive and based on an atmosphere of care and well-being. All staff help the pupils to recognise right from wrong and to be respectful for the feelings of others. Assemblies and opportunities for class worship effectively promote the pupils' spiritual and cultural awareness through the retelling of stories from the Bible and other sacred texts;
 - the quality of teaching has improved significantly; it was satisfactory in a quarter of the lessons and good or very good in three quarters. Relationships between teachers and their pupils are very good. Lessons are thoroughly prepared, well resourced, and what the pupils are expected to learn is explained to them well. New approaches to teaching have been introduced to help engage the pupils' interest in learning;
 - the curriculum is broad and balanced and improvements have sensibly focused on implementing the national guidelines for the Foundation Stage and the national strategies for literacy and numeracy. The provision for the pupils who have special educational needs is good;
 - assessment is an improved area of the school's work. There is effective tracking and recording of the progress of individuals and groups of pupils in order to identify their weaknesses and adapt teaching to meet their learning needs. The school has begun to set targets for improvement for individuals and groups of pupils;
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- the leadership and the management of the school are good; the headteacher provides very effective leadership. She is supported well by the deputy and assistant headteachers who, through their classroom teaching, have provided very good role models for the staff. The senior management team is well organised and clear about its goals. This has accelerated the process of eradicating the significant levels of underachievement that have been endemic in the school. The role of middle managers, including subject leaders, although improving remains underdeveloped; they do not take a strong enough lead in evaluating the effectiveness of the areas for which they are responsible;
 - the governors are working in close partnership with the headteacher, the local education authority (LEA) and other agencies and have improved their overall effectiveness. Their expertise has been strengthened with the addition of new governors and through a programme of training and support. The chair of governors has a good grasp of the school's priorities for further improvement;
 - the help provided by the LEA has been good. Immediately prior to and following the school's inspection in March 2002, the LEA instigated and supported the temporary arrangements for the leadership of the school. Subsequently, the LEA ensured the effective induction of the new senior management team by providing additional help and guidance. During this time, help and training from advisers, subject specialists and consultants have been well targeted to meet the school's needs.

Key issues

6. In order to improve the pupils' quality of education further, the governors, headteacher, senior managers and staff need to:

- continue to raise standards for all pupils in all subjects;
- improve the pupils' confidence as learners, including strengthening their speaking and writing skills;
- further develop the role of middle managers and subject leaders so they are better placed to report on the strengths and weaknesses in their areas of responsibility.

Inspection findings

Standards achieved by the pupils

7. Standards across the school are rising because the quality of overall provision has improved. More is being expected from the pupils and they have responded well; their attitudes to learning and their behaviour have improved. The leadership has a clearer focus on raising standards and the underachievement reported during the previous inspection of March 2002 is being addressed. The pupils are reaching higher standards; the gap is closing between the school's historically below-average attainment and the higher attainment

commonly found in similar schools. Standards overall, however, remain lower than they should be, including the pupils' speaking and writing skills, which are underdeveloped.

8. The attainment of the pupils entering the nursery class is below and, in some cases, well below that normally expected. They have underdeveloped social and communication skills and take time to settle to the nursery's routines and practices. As the pupils gain experience and confidence, they communicate with adults and with each other more readily and their progress accelerates; they make good progress overall. The environment in the nursery has been improved; areas of learning are clearly identifiable and the activities provided have purposeful outcomes. The reception classroom is appropriately organised to build upon the pupils' experiences in the nursery. The curriculum for the Foundation Stage is appropriate and its organisation in both the nursery and reception classes has been improved. The pupils make a good start to their education and, by the end of their time in the Foundation Stage, most are predicted to achieve the national goals for their age; few are predicted to exceed them. From a low baseline the pupils' language and communication skills improve steadily in the Foundation Stage. There are, however, a number of pupils entering Key Stage 1 with below-average speaking and writing skills. The school is aware of this and is seeking ways to strengthen provision across the school, but particularly at lower Key Stage 1.

9. At both key stages the school's overall performance in national tests has improved. At Key Stage 1, the school's National Curriculum test results for 2004 were higher than those of the previous year in reading, writing and mathematics; the proportion achieving the expected Level 2 was well below the national figures for 2003 in reading, below in writing but above in mathematics. At Key Stage 2, the school's National Curriculum test results for 2004 have improved in mathematics and science but have fallen slightly in English; they were well below the national figures for 2003 in English and mathematics but close to the national figure in science.

10. The quality of learning is variable but, overall, it is satisfactory and occasionally good. The pupils make good progress in the Foundation Stage. At Key Stages 1 and 2, the pupils' rate of progress has improved and is mainly satisfactory and occasionally good. The quality of learning was good or better in three quarters of the lessons seen and satisfactory in one quarter. There is, however, a contrast between the quality of learning in lessons and that found in some of the pupils' books. Over the past six months, this contrast has diminished because the work contained in books has increased in quantity and quality and now matches more closely the generally good provision in lessons. Compared to the time of the inspection in 2002, the pupils make much better progress across the school because curricular planning, teaching and the school's general ethos for learning have improved significantly.

11. In lessons the standards being reached varied considerably; there was a broad span of attainment ranging from well below average to a small number of pupils in every class who were working close to and, in some cases, above age-expected levels. The pupils are more confident in mathematics than they are in English. Many of the pupils have underdeveloped speaking and writing skills and they lack sufficient confidence when communicating.

12. There have been clear improvements in English throughout the school, mainly because teachers now have more accurate information about what pupils are achieving and so can plan with confidence to take the pupils forward. The Foundation Stage curriculum is suitably focused on literacy, which is of particular importance because many pupils enter school with limited competence in this area, and the National Literacy Strategy is used well to

guide learning in other year groups. Most pupils make good progress although for many, overall standards remain below average, and the standards reached by older pupils are often well below average.

13. A good start is made in the nursery and reception years. The focus on reading has been very successful, with over half the pupils making better-than-average progress in the reception year. Steady progress is made in writing, although there is a considerable difference between the achievements of the least competent pupils, who are still learning to form letters and write words unaided, and the most competent, who can write sentences with reasonably accurate spelling. This wide range is also evident in pupils' speaking skills, with a few pupils only just able to use single words or short sentences to express themselves, whereas others talk confidently with friends and answer questions without hesitation. Staff know the pupils well and plan carefully to ensure that all pupils make suitable progress. Particularly good use is made of teaching assistants to enable pupils with different needs to be taught at a suitable pace.

14. At Key Stage 1 standards are improving, as is reflected in the 2004 national test results, but only just over half the pupils are achieving the standards expected for their age in reading and only slightly more achieve suitable standards in writing. There is a recognition that progress needs to accelerate in literacy; Year 2 pupils are now taught in two groups based on their competence. Although this has worked reasonably well in improving standards, it has limited the opportunities for teachers to consolidate the pupils' English skills in different subjects. Nonetheless, the pupils' work shows improvement in spelling and the content of their writing, such as the use of adjectives, but presentation and handwriting are often unsatisfactory. However, the teachers are increasingly using marking effectively to guide the pupils towards improving the presentation of their work.

15. At Key Stage 2, standards in English are low, with the 2004 national test results indicating that only half the pupils achieved the expected Level 4. However, the work in lessons and books shows most pupils are improving their skills although the pace for many is still too slow. Many pupils are catching up on learning missed in previous years, and for the older pupils this is a considerable challenge. A range of strategies for promoting higher standards is now firmly in place, such as individual targets for pupils in Year 6. Pupils know what is expected of them and can often explain how they have improved. Older pupils are organised into sets relating to their levels of competence, with additional staffing for the lower attaining sets. This works well for the more capable pupils, who are attentive and able to work at the pace set by the teacher, to discuss their ideas with each other and to explain to the class. Their written work is usually well presented with a developing personal style of handwriting, and their extended writing is fluent, although vocabulary is often restricted and sentence structures are simple. These pupils have positive attitudes and make good progress, reaching at least average standards.

16. Standards in mathematics are improving quickly at Key Stage 1 and gradually at Key Stage 2; at both key stages they remain below average. In lessons, the pupils' attainment ranged widely but in each class there was a group who were working at or close to the levels expected of their ages. Standards in number were near to age-related expectations in most classes, but standards in other areas of mathematics were below average. More recently, greater emphasis has been given to aspects of mathematics such as time, money, length, weight and capacity. This has enabled the pupils to apply their better number skills to practical activities to consolidate their learning.

17. At Key Stage 1, the pupils have satisfactory number skills. The pupils in Year 1, for example, count to ten confidently and some handle larger numbers. The Year 2 pupils order numbers to 50, with higher-attaining pupils sequencing numbers up to 100. They count in twos to 20 accurately, quickly add two numbers, and choose the appropriate calculation to solve addition and subtraction problems. The pupils' books, however, indicated that there were too few opportunities to work in other aspects of mathematics. At Key Stage 2, standards were slightly above average in Year 3 but below average in all other year groups. In the Year 3 class, the pupils made very good progress in finding equivalents of simple fractions, and in ordering fractions. Many pupils in this class are developing mental agility with numbers, and their recall of multiplication facts is similar to those of pupils seen in the mixed Year 4 and Year 5 classes. By the end of Year 6, pupils' work demonstrates that most pupils are able to use their understanding of place value to multiply and divide by 10 and 100 and they use efficient written methods for calculations. However, their weak recall of multiplication tables restricts their mental work. The pupils work with decimals to three places and most identify number patterns such as factors and square numbers. Overall, however, there is little sustained high-level numerical working, as reflected in the low percentage of pupils achieving the higher level in national tests.

18. In science, although some pupils attain average standards, too few of them achieve higher levels. The school is providing the pupils with improved levels of challenge in science and their work rate has increased. Practical investigations, for example, are now very much part of the work undertaken and this is allowing potentially higher-attaining pupils to explore scientific concepts rather than simply learn information. Older pupils understand the importance of making predictions, but inference is weak. Methodologies for fair-testing are developed across the key stages, and, by Key Stage 2, most pupils have a basic understanding of constant and variable conditions in investigative work. At both key stages, the work in the pupils' books shows some improvement in the breadth and relevance of the science curriculum being studied. The pupils are making better progress, because there is regular teaching of how scientific concepts relate to what pupils observe through their investigations and this is now being recorded in a variety of ways.

19. Standards in information and communication technology (ICT) have improved; they are satisfactory overall. There has been a concerted effort to raise the profile of ICT in school; computer equipment and displays of work have been improved, including the use of digital photographs. The computer suite enables whole classes to take part in ICT lessons and is used for additional activities, accelerating the development of basic skills. Where computers were in use, the pupils' skills were similar to those found in most primary schools.

20. In other subjects of the National Curriculum, standards are variable but, overall, are slightly below average. There is a lack of depth in subjects such as geography and history, with the potentially higher-attaining pupils often limited to the initial stages of the age-related programmes of study. The school has, however, raised the profile and standards of foundation subjects. Much of the teaching in these subjects is sound, and at times good. Standards in art are good, the quality of some of the displayed work is striking and reflects a broad range of media and methods. The school's focus on improving the pupils' writing in literacy sessions is beginning to influence the quality of writing found in other subjects of the curriculum, but the impact is variable between classes and at a very early stage of development.

The pupils' attitudes, values and personal development

21. The pupils' behaviour was good; their attitudes were satisfactory and often good. The pupils were friendly and polite in lessons and around the school, relating well to each other and to adults. The vast majority of pupils are keen to learn and respond willingly to stimulating teaching. The pupils share resources and play equipment sensibly and willingly. Lunch and break times run smoothly. Their attitudes to learning have continued to improve as more of the teaching encourages participation in lessons beyond passive listening. The pupils' attitudes in the Foundation Stage and in Key Stage 1 were enthusiastic about the work they were doing. At Key Stage 2, older pupils were less interested and sometimes did not engage fully in lessons. The school is aware of this and is increasing the pupils' motivation through drama and other activities to build self-confidence.

22. The school has improved the rate of attendance; it is similar to the national figure. Although a small number of pupils have been excluded from school this year, the annual figure has reduced significantly from previous years. The school ensures matters of attendance and punctuality have a high profile through the regular use of rewards and celebration of good responses.

23. The provision for the pupils' spiritual, moral and social development is good, and that for their cultural development is satisfactory. Pupils' spirituality is promoted mainly through the school's programme for religious education, collective worship and assemblies. The strong ethos of care and concern, especially thinking about others, promotes self-worth and mutual respect. There is a strong moral code which sets boundaries for acceptable behaviour and the pupils follow the school rules. All staff help the pupils to recognise right from wrong and to be respectful for the feelings and values of others. The pupils gain self-esteem through thoughtful comments, displays of work and the valuing of their contributions. The school fosters very good relationships, and pupils are given many opportunities to work together in pairs and groups, as well as to exercise school-wide responsibility. The pupils learn to become good citizens and they contribute to the profile of the school in the community. Assemblies and opportunities for class worship effectively promote the pupils' spiritual and cultural awareness through the retelling of stories from the Bible and other sacred texts.

The quality of education

24. The quality of teaching has improved significantly; it was satisfactory in a quarter of lessons, and good or very good in three quarters. The staff have worked hard to improve their teaching by acting on training and advice. In particular, the teachers provide better opportunities for the pupils to contribute in a meaningful way, through answering questions, working collaboratively, and testing their understanding in concluding plenary sessions. There was a good balance between teacher exposition and the time provided for the pupils to engage in activities. Relationships between teachers and their pupils were very good. All the lessons were thoroughly prepared and planned, and what the pupils were expected to learn was explained to them well. New approaches to teaching have been introduced, including the effective use of interactive whiteboards in classrooms. The teachers worked closely with the support staff, who were directed appropriately and made a valuable contribution to the pupils' learning. They were deployed well and undertook useful monitoring activities at the start and end of lessons. They supported the school's special educational needs programme well.

25. The curriculum is broad and generally well balanced. The curriculum for the Foundation Stage is much improved, better resourced and managed. The school has appropriately focused on developing the pupils' skills in literacy, numeracy and, to a lesser extent, science. A variety of clubs and sporting activities is available to the pupils outside of normal school hours. The provision for the pupils who have special educational needs is good. A teaching assistant works effectively alongside the headteacher as the co-coordinator for special educational needs; documentation is of very good quality and regularly updated. The nurture class provides appropriate support to a small number of pupils who have additional social, emotional and behavioural needs.

26. Assessment data is used well by the core management team to highlight trends in performance over time. The school has focused on improving pupils' standards and has the essential information on what pupils are achieving and how well they are progressing. This data has been carefully analysed and has enabled accurate targets to be set for further improvement within clear timescales. This approach is working well throughout the school, with the impact on standards being most evident in the younger age groups, where the pupils have less catching up to do. A thorough analysis of the data from national tests and other assessments has enabled the school to identify strengths and weaknesses in key areas and subjects by year group. There is effective tracking and recording of the progress of individuals and groups of pupils in order to identify their weaknesses and adapt teaching to meet their learning needs, and the school has begun to set the pupils targets for improvement. The pupils' work is marked regularly by staff but there is some variation in its quality.

Leadership and management

27. The leadership and the management of the school are good; the headteacher provides very effective leadership. Since joining the school in April 2003, she has set high expectations of pupils and staff and insisted that underachievement needs to be eradicated. She maintains an active and visible presence around the building. She has a good knowledge of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The core management group, of headteacher, deputy and assistant headteacher, constitutes an effective senior team. It has been successful in driving forward change and setting a more purposeful tone for the work of the school. The team meets regularly to discuss strategic issues and ensure consistency in the messages given to staff. The improvements made to the school's learning environment and ethos, the manner in which the curriculum is planned and the focus on teaching and learning have all proved beneficial to the progress made by the pupils. The school monitors its work effectively; self-evaluation is detailed and perceptive and based on regular reviews of what has been undertaken. The school's direction is clear and priorities for further improvement have been established. Both the deputy headteacher and the assistant headteacher have class teaching responsibilities; they are effective practitioners who provide very good role models for the staff.

28. The role of middle managers, including subject leaders, has begun to develop, with greater clarity about responsibilities. Middle managers do not, however, take a strong enough lead in directing and evaluating the areas for which they are responsible. The middle management is underdeveloped and, outside the senior team, the school's capacity to evaluate its own effectiveness is too fragile. Subject leaders are not fully aware of whole-school issues in relation to their subject, nor are they able to articulate the next steps in tackling underachievement.

29. The governing body is supportive of the school and is better positioned to hold senior managers to account for their actions. The chair of governors knows the school well and is helping governors to maintain their support and develop their critical awareness. Governors visit school whenever they can or make telephone contact with their link members of staff. Monitoring diaries have been introduced to enable governors to record and report upon their visits. There is a good relationship between the governors, the LEA and external agencies. The governors work hard to support the school and attendance at meetings is good. Their expertise has been strengthened with the addition of new governors.

30. The LEA has provided good levels of support. Immediately prior to and following the school's March 2002 inspection, the LEA instigated and supported the temporary arrangements for the leadership of the school. Subsequently, the LEA ensured the effective induction of the new senior management team by providing additional help and guidance. Help and training from advisers, subject specialists and consultants have been well targeted to meet the school's needs. The reports by officers of the LEA following their activities have been detailed and informative. Individual teachers have valued the support they have received from LEA personnel.

Implementation of the action plan

31. The inspection report of 2002 required the school to address five key issues. These principally related to: raising standards; improving teaching; securing effective leadership and management; improving the quality and range of the curriculum; and improving the pupils' behaviour. Overall, good progress has been made and most tasks have been completed.

32. Standards have risen in the Foundation Stage and at both key stages. The new leadership team has successfully focused on eradicating underachievement. Changes to staffing, better curricular planning and improved teaching methods have all combined to accelerate learning. Most pupils now make at least satisfactory progress.

33. Training for the staff has been targeted well and the quality of teaching has improved. The staff work well together as a team, sharing ideas and, where possible, planning and evaluating their work. Good support has been provided by the LEA, particularly in helping staff to implement the national strategies for literacy and numeracy.

34. The leadership and the management of the school have improved significantly. Strategic planning is good and the school's direction is purposeful and clear. The senior management team has plans to raise the impact of middle managers and help sustain improvement.

35. The school provides a good curriculum overall. Day-to-day planning has improved so that work is well matched to pupils' ability levels. The better balance of time allocated to foundation subjects is reflected in pupils' work. The school has an appropriate long-term curriculum plan to avoid the repetition of work by pupils in mixed-age classes.

36. Pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school has improved through effective use of sanctions and rewards. Teaching assistants play an important part in maintaining the good patterns of behaviour.

37. As a consequence of the school's efforts, the pupils enjoy school and participate more actively in lessons; their progress is accelerating. Standards of attainment have begun to rise and the school has eradicated the patterns of underachievement associated with its past.

Appendix – Information about the inspection

The school was inspected under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996 by a Registered Inspector and a team of inspectors in March 2002. The inspection was critical of many aspects of the work of the school and, in accordance with that Act, the school was made subject to special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education.

The school was visited by HMI in October 2002, in February, June and October 2003, and in February 2004 to assess the progress it was making to implement its action plan and address the key issues in the inspection report of March 2002.

In June and July 2004, two HMI and one Additional Inspector returned to inspect the school for two days. The inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996, which gives Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools the authority to cause any school to be inspected. The inspection was also deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act.

Twenty two lessons or parts of lessons, one assembly and five registration sessions were inspected. The pupils were observed at break and lunch times and samples of their work were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the assistant headteacher, the co-ordinator for numeracy, the chair of governors and a group of Year 6 pupils, and informal discussions were held with other staff and pupils. A wide range of the school's documentation was scrutinised. Account was also taken of the evidence from previous monitoring inspections.

The inspection assessed the quality of education provided and the progress the school has made, in particular in relation to the main findings and key issues in the inspection report of March 2002 and the action plan prepared by the governing body to address those key issues.