



**Office for Standards
in Education**

Inspection report
Alston Primary School

Cumbria Education Authority

Dates of inspection: 29 and 30 November 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:	Alston Primary School
Type of school:	Primary
Status:	Community
Age range of pupils:	4 to 11 years
Headteacher:	Mr P Duncan
Address of school:	Garrigill Road Alston Cumbria CA9 3UF
Telephone:	01434 381213
Name and address of appropriate authority:	The governing body, address as above
Chair of governors:	Mr M Angier
Local education authority area:	Cumbria
Unique reference number:	112101
Name of reporting inspector:	Mr I Rodger, Additional Inspector
Dates of inspection:	29 and 30 November 2004

Introduction

1. Alston Primary School is situated in the small market town of Alston. The number of pupils on roll is 137; this is significantly fewer than when the school was inspected in 2002, partly as a result of local demographic changes. All the pupils are of white British heritage and all speak English as their first language. The proportion of pupils entitled to a free school meal is broadly average. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs, at 17 per cent, is below average. Since the inspection of October 2002, there has been a reduction in the number of teachers so that, from the beginning of this school year, there has been a mixed-age class for the first time for several years.

1. The school was inspected in October 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.

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

1. In November 2004, two Additional Inspectors 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 October 2002.

Main findings

1. 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 below average overall but improving. An average proportion of pupils achieve the expected level in English but relatively few attain the higher levels. In mathematics, a below average proportion of pupils achieve the national expectation or the higher level. Standards in science are average and in information and communication technology (ICT) they are good. There is underachievement throughout the school and at all levels of ability. The staff are working hard to eradicate this underachievement;
 - the pupils are generally making satisfactory progress but this is often insufficient to enable them to attain the levels of which they are capable. Generally pupils do not make the progress they should between Years 2 and Years 6;
 - the personal development of the pupils is good. They are polite and are willing to do all that is asked of them. Their spiritual development is fostered well in assemblies and through subjects that give them a sense of wonder, such as science and geography. Their moral development is good and they have a sense of fairness and know right from wrong. They are increasingly taking responsibility for their own learning and contributing to the running of the
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school through the school council. Cultural development is good and the staff work hard to counter the geographical and cultural isolation of the school;

- behaviour is good, both in lessons and around the school. There has been one recent fixed-term exclusion;
- attendance is satisfactory and broadly in line with national figures. Punctuality is good;
- the quality of education provided is satisfactory. The quality of teaching has improved since the inspection of October 2002. In all the lessons the teaching was at least satisfactory and in seven of the 18 lessons it was good. There is still, however, too little of the very good or excellent teaching which would accelerate the pupils' achievement;
- the curriculum is broad and reasonably well balanced and the pupils are introduced to an increasingly wide range of interesting experiences. The use of ICT across the curriculum is increasing. A good range of visits and visitors enhances the provision to the benefit of pupils;
- the leadership of the provision for pupils with special educational needs has undergone recent changes and at present not all of these pupils are receiving appropriate support or make the progress they should;
- the quality of leadership and management throughout the school is variable. The headteacher has had to take some difficult decisions and he has done so with resolution. He has worked hard to improve the appearance of the school and to bring greater coherence and consistency to what is taught. However, some important issues regarding the management of the school remain unresolved and it is not always clear how strategic plans will be put into operation;
- the monitoring and evaluation of teaching and pupils' work have increased and are beginning to be effective. A new assessment policy is providing class teachers with more information about the progress their pupils make and, in some subjects, it is enabling them to plan work that is more accurately matched to the pupils' needs. It also enables them to set targets for individual pupils;
- subject leadership in English is strong. Uncertainties about the leadership of mathematics have been resolved but, in other subjects, leadership and management are underdeveloped;
- the governing body has not always been completely behind the leadership of the school but is prepared to support the headteacher in what he is seeking to achieve while retaining the capacity to act as critical friend;
- the local education authority (LEA) has offered consistent support to the school and it has helped with some key appointments. It will need to keep the school under constant review as it moves into the post-special measures period.

Key issues

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

- maintain their efforts to raise standards in English and mathematics, especially in increasing the proportion of pupils who attain the higher levels;
- strengthen leadership and management in order to raise the overall quality of the education provided from satisfactory to at least good;
- ensure that the provision for those pupils who have special educational needs fully meets requirements.

Inspection findings

Standards achieved by the pupils

7. Standards in English are below average overall. Most pupils throughout the school attain the expected level for their age but there remains a persistent minority who do not, and too few pupils in each year group succeed in attaining above-average standards. However, the school's 2004 national test results for seven-year-olds showed an improvement in reading, with all pupils reaching the level expected for their age, which was better than the national figure and the school's results for the previous year.

8. In lessons and in pupils' work over recent months there are signs of a rise in standards although there remains considerable capacity for further improvement. Most pupils read with reasonable fluency and greatly enjoy books and stories. The regular use of ICT in English lessons and homework has enabled them to use and extend their reading skills, for example when researching on the internet. When searching for specific topics online, older pupils recognise the importance of spelling, and, although this is not always reflected in their work, most can spell reasonably well when they concentrate. Laptop computers are readily available so word processing is also a regular part of lessons in most year groups. On occasions, this has successfully helped the pupils to recognise and change inaccurate spelling while maintaining a better quality of presentation than they are currently achieving in their handwritten work.

9. There are also recent improvements in the writing of the older pupils. The school has focused on this aspect through a project called 'wicked writing' and the pupils have responded well to imaginative writing tasks and the range of different ways to present their work. For example, Year 6 pupils wrote a good quality script for a play using what they had learned about Shakespeare's style of writing, as well as taking account of the historical context in the words they chose. Individual pupils in this year group also wrote their own thriller in booklet form, often with good use of vocabulary and sentence structures to create different moods and plausible characters. Where such motivating activities are accompanied by teachers' high expectations of what pupils can achieve, the standards are suitably high and the pupils make good progress. However, this is not yet consistent across the year groups. Many pupils are not yet fluent writers; they hesitate to begin writing, often have too little time

to complete their work and too rarely have the opportunity to edit their original drafts thoroughly.

10. Pupils' listening skills are generally good unless they are challenged to listen for too long; speaking is less well developed. The school has usefully introduced opportunities for pupils to talk about their work with a partner as a regular feature of lessons. This works well in enabling the pupils to share ideas and, sometimes, reach a decision. However, this talk is rarely at a level that extends their vocabulary or enables them to develop skills such as asking precise questions or fluently making a point during large-group discussions. This immaturity in language development is also noticeable in pupils' writing in subjects other than English, where, although most clearly understand the technical vocabulary of subjects such as science, geography and history, these words are rarely used in their written explanations.

11. Overall, pupils' progress is steady but only rarely is it sufficiently brisk to raise standards, especially for the most able pupils. Most pupils who have special educational needs make reasonable progress. However, they do not fare well when the teachers' introductions to lessons are too long to maintain their attention or where tasks are similar for all pupils in the class and they do not have adult support or resources adapted to help them complete their work. The most capable pupils cope well with long introductions to lessons but not with the short periods allowed in some lessons for recording their work, as this often prevents them developing their ideas thoroughly.

12. In mathematics, the proportion of pupils attaining the higher grades in national tests remains low and this has the effect of lowering the school's overall performance. The school's results in 2004, compared to all schools nationally, were well below average in both Years 2 and 6. Despite this, there is improvement. The pupils' books show that an increasingly wide range of mathematical experiences is offered to them and they are increasingly given opportunities to apply their knowledge of number facts to practical problems. The pupils' recall of these number facts is slow and not always secure so they hesitate to think flexibly or apply more than one operation to a calculation. They do not always see the relationship between operations; for example, Year 5 pupils were not all aware that subtraction is the inverse of addition.

13. Standards in science are broadly average, with an increasing emphasis being placed upon investigation and practical enquiry. Pupils have a reasonable understanding of what makes a test fair and are always interested in the outcomes of their enquiries. Standards in ICT are good. Pupils turn readily to computers and the use of laptops in lessons is giving pupils throughout the age range a good familiarity with the keyboard and its various functions.

The pupils' attitudes, values and personal development

14. The pupils' personal development is good. They have good attitudes to school and are keen to do all that is asked of them. They willingly undertake investigations and are increasingly becoming responsible for aspects of their learning. They behave well in class and around the school. Playtimes are lively but sociable occasions. There has been one recent, fixed-term exclusion and the correct procedures were followed.

15. The pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Assemblies usually contain a spiritual dimension and give pupils opportunities to reflect upon global or moral issues. The pupils have a good sense of fairness and know right from wrong. The

school council enables them to participate in the running of the school. It has had a recent, tangible success in acquiring a climbing frame for the school grounds. The pupils' cultural development is fostered well by a range of activities including visits and visitors. These work well to counteract the geographical and cultural isolation of the school. Attendance is around the national average and punctuality is good.

The quality of education

16. The quality of education provided is satisfactory overall. The quality of teaching has improved since the inspection of October 2002. Of the 18 lessons, the quality of teaching was at least satisfactory in all of them and good in seven. The teachers plan consistently and conscientiously and strive hard to interest and motivate their pupils. The management of behaviour has improved and is good. Questioning techniques have also improved and efforts are made to provide work at levels appropriate to the pupils' attainment. This is not always successfully achieved, however. Too little of the teaching is very good or better and it is this quality of teaching that will be required to eradicate the underachievement that exists throughout the school.

17. The quality of teaching in English is satisfactory overall, with good teaching evident in several lessons. Lessons are carefully prepared and resources are well used. Lessons are calm and follow well-established routines. The numbers of pupils in several classes are small and this helps teachers to give appropriate attention to individual pupils. Despite teachers' best efforts, in larger classes where additional help from another trained adult is rarely available, the teaching of individual pupils or small groups is less frequent. As a result, the learning of some pupils is not as well supported. In these circumstances, the teaching does not always fully reflect the wide range of pupils' needs within the class.

18. Assessment procedures have been revised and all staff now have useful information about each pupil's current level of achievement and their yearly targets for improvement. Test results in Years 2 to 6 also provide information on individual pupils' specific strengths and weaknesses. However, the link between this data and the teaching and learning planned for pupils is not yet fully in place.

19. The curriculum is broad and reasonably well balanced. A whole-school curriculum map is in operation and is used by teachers to plan work throughout the term. Teachers are increasingly looking for links between subjects. For example, in a Year 5 literacy lesson, the pupils' knowledge of their geographic topic on water was effectively used as the basis for learning how to compile a record of water usage in a sub-tropical country, using a writing style appropriate for the task. Information and communication technology is increasingly being used both to develop the pupils' computer and other technological skills and as a way of improving their learning in different subjects.

20. The provision for pupils who have special educational needs has undergone several changes in leadership recently. This has resulted in some pupils not having appropriate provision for their needs. Most make steady progress and achieve appropriate standards but some do not. The checking of the pupils' progress and experiences to ensure that they are succeeding as well as they can is not sufficiently robust or comprehensive. Although the pupils follow individual education plans, timescales are not always clear nor targets suitably specific. Class teachers have the main responsibility for providing appropriate experiences for most of the pupils who have been identified as needing extra support. Additional adult

support is mainly voluntary; it is limited but very helpful in ensuring that pupils maintain their interest and are helped to understand what is expected of them.

1. The provision for gifted and talented pupils is at a very early stage of development. An initial group of pupils has been identified and the membership may be adjusted as staff reflect on the performance of these pupils in their classes in the current term. A useful project has recently begun with Year 6 pupils working on developing more advanced ICT skills with the support of staff from a secondary school.

1. The provision for pupils in the Foundation Stage has also undergone recent changes with the pupils in the reception class being taught alongside the pupils in Year 1. This new arrangement is being carefully monitored. At present, the signs are that arrangements are satisfactory and that the pupils are being taught an appropriate range of educational experiences in line with national guidance.

1. The pupils are well cared for and the school has developed its links with parents and the local community. A good range of information is provided for parents, and the school is seeking to make links with other schools locally and further afield.

Leadership and management

1. The leadership and management of the school are of variable quality. Since the school became subject to special measures, the headteacher has had to make several hard decisions and he has done so resolutely and with the long-term development of the school in mind. Considerable gains have been made in improving the appearance of the school and developing more consistency in the approach taken in classes. New policies for assessment have been introduced and the monitoring and evaluation of teaching and pupils' work have increased and are beginning to be effective. However, important aspects of the management of the school, such as the provision for pupils who have special educational needs, are still not completely resolved and strategic planning does not always result in identifiable action. Communication within the school and with the local community has improved and staff morale is generally good despite recently announced redundancies.

1. The governing body has not always been completely in support of the headteacher and what he is trying to do but this relationship is now on a more secure footing. There is a good level of backing for the headteacher's actions and a desire to move the school forward into the post-special measures period. The school is actively seeking Investors in People status to improve the professional development of the staff.

1. Subject leadership is strong in English. Long-term uncertainties about the leadership of mathematics have been resolved and the subject is now satisfactorily led, with the potential for being well led. Leadership in other subjects is underdeveloped although the provision for ICT has improved considerably since the inspection of October 2002.

1. The LEA has provided continuous support for the school during its period in special measures although there have been several changes of link adviser. Subject personnel have been particularly effective in English, mathematics and science. The LEA is aware that the school will need to be kept under continuous review as it moves beyond special measures.

Implementation of the action plan

1. The inspection report of October 2002 required the school to address four key issues and a series of six minor issues. The key issues principally related to: improving the quality of teaching in Years 1 and 2; improving the progress and achievement of pupils with special educational needs and those of higher attainment; improving the quality of leadership and management at all levels; and improving the quality of provision in all subjects apart from mathematics and ICT. Overall, reasonable progress has been made and most tasks have been completed, but there is still work to do, particularly regarding the provision for pupils who have special educational needs.

1. The quality of teaching in Years 1 and 2 has improved considerably and is now at least satisfactory and often good. The staff concerned, who were not in post at the time of the October 2002 inspection, have undertaken training and have improved their performance considerably.

1. The provision for pupils who have special educational needs and those who are gifted and talented has undergone several changes of leadership. Basic policy and procedures are in place but there has been some slippage in the application of these. The result is that not all pupils who have special educational needs receive their full entitlement.

1. Leadership and management have improved at all levels and there is more strategic planning, better communication, more monitoring and evaluation of the provision and clearer policies in place. Some problems remain, however, in the implementation of policies and in linking strategic planning to action. Issues arising from the falling number of pupils on roll have been managed well.

1. The quality of provision across the curriculum has improved considerably. The curriculum is now broad and reasonably well balanced and national guidance has been used well to improve the quality of planning.

1. Minor issues, regarding investigative and experimental skills in science, the pupils' initiative and personal responsibility, multicultural education, the monitoring of attendance, behaviour and personal development, and child protection procedures, have all been addressed satisfactorily. A minor issue concerning the quality of writing has, correctly, been treated by the school as a key issue and progress has been good.

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 October 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 May and October 2003, and in January and July 2004 to assess the progress it was making to implement its action plan and address the key issues in the inspection report of October 2002.

In November 2004, two Additional Inspectors 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.

Eighteen lessons or parts of lessons, two assemblies and two registration sessions were inspected. The pupils were observed at break and lunchtimes and samples of their work were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, senior staff, the chair and another member of the governing body, and a representative of the LEA. 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 October 2002 and the action plan prepared by the governing body to address those key issues.