



**Better
education
and care**

Inspection report

Rivacre Valley Primary School

Unique Reference Number 130270
LEA Cheshire

Inspection number 274322
Inspection dates 15 and 16 March 2005
Reporting inspector Mrs S Øyen

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.

Type of School	Primary	School address	Rivacre Brow
School category	Community		Overpool
			Ellesmere Port
Age range of pupils	3 to 11 years		Cheshire
			CH66 1LE
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	0151 355 2548
Number on roll	122	Fax number	0151 357 2932
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mr I Aspden
Date of previous inspection	September 2003	Acting Headteacher	Mr D Walden

Age group	Published	Reference no.
3 to 11 years	26 April 2005	274322

Introduction

When Rivacre Valley Primary School was inspected in September 2003, it was judged to require special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education. Her Majesty's Inspectors of schools (HMI) subsequently visited the school on three occasions to monitor its progress, and reinspected the school in March 2005.

Description of the school

Rivacre Valley Primary School is a small primary school in Overpool on the outskirts of Ellesmere Port, an area of significant deprivation. The percentage of the pupils eligible for free school meals has fallen, but at 28 per cent is still above the national average. Very few of the 122 pupils are from minority ethnic groups and none has English as an additional language. Twelve pupils from Traveller families currently attend the school, but the number varies throughout the year. Each of the five classes has pupils from two year groups. In the mornings, 13 nursery pupils join 14 reception year pupils in the Foundation Stage class. The school has an infant assessment unit; seven of its eight pupils have a Statement of Special Educational Needs. These pupils join the Foundation Stage and infant class for some activities. Seven junior pupils have a Statement of Special Educational Needs, predominantly for moderate learning difficulties. Until 2004, they were taught by specialist staff in a unit in the school, but they are now taught alongside pupils of the same age. Twenty seven other pupils have been identified as having special educational needs. Overall, the percentage of pupils who have special educational needs is almost twice the national average.

The local education authority (LEA) seconded an experienced headteacher to lead the school from September 2003.

© Crown copyright 2005

This report may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that all extracts quoted are reproduced verbatim without adaptation and on condition that the source and date thereof are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the School Inspections Act 1996, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Overall effectiveness of the school

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.

Rivacre Valley Primary is an attractive, welcoming school. It is a happy place where the pupils benefit from a varied, all-round experience. The high level of care, support and encouragement from all the adults ensures that every pupil plays a full part in school life. The pupils enjoy school; they behave well and relish active experiences, especially artwork, which is a growing strength of the school. Although there is much good teaching throughout the school, the pupils' learning is not as good. Many pupils need much adult help and to repeat activities several times before they grasp new ideas. The pupils' limited language skills hinder their understanding and performance. From an often low start, the nursery and reception year pupils do well because of strong teaching. Standards are rising in the infant years; however, they are improving less rapidly at Key Stage 2, where they remain very low. The older junior pupils have many gaps in their knowledge and skills. The acting headteacher has drawn the best out of the staff and renewed a sense of purpose.

Improvement since the last inspection

The inspection in September 2003 required the school to address key issues concerned with raising standards, the quality of teaching, the quality of middle management and improving the level of attendance. The school has systematically dealt with each aspect, while also improving the quality of the environment and broadening the range of experiences for the pupils. The overall improvement has been good although there is still much to do, especially in the work to raise standards. Changes in staffing have strengthened the quality of teaching and subject leadership. This has had a positive impact on the pupils' progress and enthusiasm for school. Attendance rates have risen slightly and unauthorised absence has dropped by 30 per cent. The inclusion into the mainstream classes of the junior pupils, who were previously taught in a special unit in school, was very well managed.

Capacity to improve

While the school has good potential to improve, much is dependent on the stability of the leadership and management and the continuing confidence and skills of the subject leaders to raise standards. The school has sound procedures and systems to track the pupils' progress and to monitor its work. It is using the information gathered to decide how to support the pupils' development but, given the wide range of the pupils' learning and personal needs, is only in the early stages of judging how well the teaching, organisation and curriculum meets those needs.

What the school should do to improve further

The school's development plan recognises the areas where improvement is needed. However the key priorities are to:

- accelerate the rate of the pupils' progress in order to raise standards especially in English, mathematics and science;
- improve the quality of learning;
- enrich the pupils' language skills;
- improve leadership and management expertise in planning for the pupils' learning and providing a curriculum matched to their needs.

Achievement and standards

Standards remain very low. Very few of the pupils in Year 6 are working at the level for their age in English, mathematics and science. Although the pupils are now making satisfactory progress, there are too many gaps in their learning from previous years, especially in mathematics and science. The school is unlikely to better its results from 2004, which placed it in the lowest five per cent of similar schools. However, there is the potential for standards to rise. Teacher assessment indicates that several pupils in Year 5 are already working at Level 4, the level expected of pupils in Year 6. There is a long tail of low attainment in each year group, but the school's data shows that an increasing proportion of the pupils are making at least satisfactory progress. The pupils who have special educational needs make good progress over time towards the targets in their individual education plans because of good quality one-to-one and small-group tuition.

The pupils get off to a good start in the nursery and reception years because of strong teaching and a good focus on the development of early reading, writing and number skills. The staff are effective in developing the pupils' self-esteem, independence and interest in learning. From a low start, many pupils move into Year 1 at, or close to, the level expected for their age. Continued steady progress means that by the end of Year 2, most are working at the level expected for their age, although there is little high attainment.

Focused teaching and the use of targets, homework and support programmes have boosted the pupils' progress. This is most evident in writing. There have been significant improvements in the quality of presentation and the accuracy of spelling and punctuation. Good poems and stories have been published by the school and the LEA. In mathematics and science, the pupils' rate of progress is more varied and not fast enough to ensure that standards rise markedly. Too many pupils have a poor grasp of number relationships and are uncertain how to tackle number problems. They are tentative in explaining their thinking. Their limited language skills also hinder their reading and work in science. Many pupils find it hard to infer, deduce and apply what they know.

Personal development

The pupils are very biddable and willing; in class sessions, however, many allow their concentration to drift and only hear part of what the teacher says. Many are hesitant to have a go in case they get it wrong. With encouragement from the adults, they work steadily although at a slow pace. When working in groups and taking part in activities, such as artwork and science investigations, many show excitement and enthusiasm. The pupils' confidence and involvement has grown as a result of the school seeking and acting on their views. The lunchtime dance club, attended by 35 pupils, was led effectively and maturely by two older pupils with minimal supervision. The school councillors, playground buddies and prefects take their leadership roles very seriously. In lessons, the pupils have few opportunities to show their skills in organising things for themselves.

The pupils' behaviour is good at all times of the school day. The good level of supervision and care ensures that the pupils new to the school and those pupils with emotional, social and behavioural needs integrate extremely well. Every pupil plays an active part in school life and the older pupils are keen to help the younger ones. Relationships are very good throughout the school. The pupils are aware of how they are expected to behave towards others and follow the good, positive models given by the adults. The adults also give high value to recognising the pupils' achievements. The stunning, vibrant displays of the pupils' work add much to the warm atmosphere of the school. While the planned provision for the pupils' social and moral development is good, that for their spiritual and cultural development is satisfactory. Although a start has been made in lessons to help the pupils to reflect on their own learning, there are few occasions in school assemblies for prayer and reflection.

Incentives have helped to improve punctuality and attendance, although overall attendance is still below the national average. The school has tightened-up procedures and been successful in reducing the number of unauthorised absences by 30 per cent. The majority of pupils attend regularly but the high incidence of illness and severe medical problems badly affects attendance.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved since the inspection in 2003 and is now good. It was good in seven of the 18 lessons and very good in a further two, both in the Foundation Stage class, and satisfactory in the other nine. Changes in the teaching staff, together with the staff's willingness to act on professional guidance have strengthened the quality of teaching throughout the school. However, the quality of learning lags behind and is one of the prime reasons why standards are slow to rise.

The strengths in the teaching lay in the detailed preparation of lessons and conscientious teamwork. The teaching assistants played a vital role in leading groups and working alongside pupils to keep them involved. Many teachers showed creativity in grabbing the pupils' interest, including the use of the interactive whiteboard, and in displaying key

information on tables and walls. Classrooms were bright, attractive and welcoming; Neptune's Room, where the learning mentor works with groups, was particularly inviting. The staff managed the pupils well. They used constant praise, endearments and encouraging comments to recognise the pupils' efforts, to regain their attention and to keep them focused. This was also evident in the teachers' marking of the pupils' work, although there was little specific reference to the pupils' targets.

A shared good facet of the teaching was the frequent use of prompts and reminders of what had just been done or said. While some pupils learnt quickly, many pupils were heavily reliant on the adults. Too much of their learning was fleeting; they were generally slow to grasp new information and procedures. They needed to repeat experiences to see the relevance of what they knew and had been told. There were many good examples of practical tasks, such as holding chocolate drops to see what happened, that ensured all pupils learnt from experience. This was very evident in the Foundation Stage class and the infant assessment unit, where the pupils learnt through well-planned play and adult-led sessions with a focus on reinforcing small steps in learning especially in reading, writing and number. These small steps and the strategies the pupils needed to use were not always fully explicit in other lessons.

The staff know the pupils really well. The school has developed a very good, coherent programme of care and support involving the learning mentor, teaching and support staff. Termly refinements to the system to track the pupils' progress have enabled the teachers to identify those pupils who would benefit from additional support. There are sessions to build the self-esteem of some pupils, to extend the experiences of the gifted and talented in art, and to boost the performance of others, especially in reading and number.

The recent introduction of setting by attainment across all the junior years in English and mathematics does not take the wide disparities in the pupils' interests and learning rates into full account. In some lessons, the content was unsuitable for the younger pupils, while in others the younger pupils were well ahead of the lower attaining older pupils, who needed much more time to grasp the content.

The curriculum is wider and better balanced than in September 2003. There is an increased emphasis on information and communication technology and on the arts with visits, clubs, extra activities and links with other subjects. A new strength is the way the pupils work together on large-scale art pieces, often three-dimensional, using a mixture of techniques and materials. Spare accommodation has been used well to provide a specialist art area and the school is making full use of the expertise of support staff. However, the school has yet to ensure the progressive and incremental development of skills in all subjects and to match the curriculum closely to the learning needs of the pupils.

The support for the school from the parents and the community has steadily grown with increasing attendance at events and meetings.

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher has been influential in lifting morale, renewing the parents' confidence in the school and giving the staff a sense of common purpose. He has encouraged all members of staff to use their skills and talents. As a result, Rivacre Valley is a happy school where all feel valued. The high level of commitment and hard work of everyone shows in the smart, attractive appearance of the school inside and out, and in the school's updated illustrated prospectus with accompanying video disc. The school is opening its doors to other practitioners and has a much more positive profile in the community. It is well on its way to meeting its mission statement.

There is an effective partnership between the acting headteacher and the deputy headteacher in leading and managing the school. Changes in staffing the infant assessment unit and the integration into mainstream classes of the pupils from the junior special unit were well managed. The confidence of the subject leaders has soared as they have gained in expertise and seen success in what they have done. There is, however, a tendency to over-estimate the quality of what the school provides and little critical appraisal of the factors that affect the pupil' learning, especially in the light of the current good level of staffing.

Under the guidance of the acting headteacher, the school has become increasingly self-reliant in deciding what needs to be done to raise standards. Subject leaders report regularly to the governing body, as does the school council. Governance is much improved and is now satisfactory. The chair of governors gives a good lead in holding the school to account and has a sound understanding of the fragility of the school as it faces a change in its leadership for the new school year. The governors are working with the LEA to recruit a headteacher with the right expertise for the next stage in the school's development. They have already agreed a short period when the two headteachers will work together to smooth the transition. Governors are also looking at ways to ensure stability of staffing and finances.

The LEA has worked closely with the school and given good financial, curricular and staffing support not least in facilitating the secondment of an experienced headteacher. The support and close monitoring planned for the school is crucial at a time of leadership change and vital in ensuring both the continuing focus on raising standards and the further development of expertise in leadership and management.

Appendix – Information about the inspection

Rivacre Valley Primary School was inspected in September 2003 by Additional Inspectors 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. 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 January, April and November 2004 to assess the progress it was making to implement its action plan and address the key issues in the inspection report of September 2003.

In March 2005, one 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, and was also deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act.

Eighteen lessons and two assemblies were inspected. The pupils' conduct was observed around the school and on the playground at break and lunchtimes, and samples of their work were inspected. Discussions were held with the acting headteacher, key subject leaders, the chair of governors, a representative from the LEA and informally with other staff. A wide range of the school's documentation was scrutinised. Account was 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 September 2003 and the action plan prepared by the governing body to address those key issues.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the leaflet 'Complaining about HMI-led Ofsted inspections', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

© CROWN COPYRIGHT 2005. This document may be freely reproduced in whole or in part, for non-commercial purposes, provided the source and the date are acknowledged.