



Alston Primary School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 112101
Local Authority Cumbria
Inspection number 289172
Inspection dates 13–14 February 2007
Reporting inspector Pat Kime HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Primary	School address	Garrigill Road
School category	Community		Alston, Cumbria
Age range of pupils	4–11		CA9 3UF
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01434 381213
Number on roll (school)	114	Fax number	01434 381213
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mr Iain Paterson
		Headteacher	Mr Michael Sheridan
Date of previous school inspection	1 November 2004		

Age group 4–11	Inspection dates 13–14 February 2007	Inspection number 289172
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Description of the school

This is a smaller than average primary school which serves an isolated small town and the surrounding rural area in the north-east of Cumbria. The number of pupils has fallen significantly over recent years. There are now nearly 20% fewer pupils than at the previous inspection. Pupils are taught in four classes, three of which cover two year groups. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) is below average but a larger than average proportion of these pupils carry statements of special educational needs. Almost all the pupils are of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals is below the national average.

In January 2006 the school federated with a very small school situated about four miles away, at Nenthead. The two schools share a headteacher and governing body. An assistant headteacher is based at Alston and other leadership roles for the school are spread across the federation. The headteacher and chair of the governing body have taken on these roles since the previous inspection.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

In the two years since it was last inspected, the school has improved a lot in many aspects of its work and this is recognised by parents. Standards in the core subjects have risen significantly to an above average level. Pupils' achievement is now good, with the previous widespread underachievement almost entirely overcome. The teaching is now good.

Alston Primary School is now a good school. The senior team has proved itself. It is ambitious for the school. Its evaluation of the schools' strengths and weaknesses and the point it has reached on its journey of improvement is accurate. Consequently, the school is well-placed to improve further. The federation with Nenthead School has benefited Alston.

The school promotes pupils' personal development, including the spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects, very effectively. This is done through the school's ethos, the taught curriculum and activities beyond lessons. As a result, pupils become mature, responsible, independent and thoughtful. They enjoy lessons and the good range of extra activities. Pupils are well-behaved and keen to do well. They have a good understanding of healthy lifestyles and try to put this into practice. Pupils are cared for well and the school works in good partnership with other agencies to secure their well-being and safety.

Some of the teaching, particularly in Key Stage 2, is of a very good quality, with expectations set high for every pupil, in relation to their ability. This is the key factor in pupils' significantly better than average progress in this key stage. However, some teaching, notably for pupils in Reception and Year 1, is simply satisfactory.

Senior staff and governors have achieved a great deal in two years. They have concentrated, understandably, on ensuring statutory requirements are met; raising standards in the core subjects; and supporting and improving less effective teaching. The subject leaders for English and mathematics have played a key role in the drive for improvement. The school is now ready to embark on a new phase in its development and needs to adapt its whole-school planning to support this.

What the school should do to improve further

- Further improve the quality of provision in Reception and Year 1 so that all pupils do as well as they can.
- Match planning for improvement to the needs of the next stage of the school's development, ensuring that:
 - a) priorities are clear

b) the steps needed to realise the school's ambitions are clear.

- Develop the role of subject leaders in promoting good achievement and high quality in teaching and the curriculum in all subjects.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

What children can do when they start school varies considerably from year to year and between children but, taken overall, it is broadly typical average for their age. Over their time in the school pupils' progress is good but it is not even. For most, progress is better from Year 2 to Year 6 than earlier in the school. Nonetheless, the widespread underachievement reported in 2004 has been almost eradicated.

Standards in Reception indicate children have made satisfactory progress since starting school. They are on course to meet the targets set for them by end of the year. In Key Stage 1, pupils make satisfactory overall progress. However, the school's records show that many pupils do not do well enough in English in Year 1. Extra help, as well as the class teaching, enable them to catch up in Year 2. The present Year 2 pupils have made good progress since starting in Reception. Progress is very good in Key Stage 2, where there is a concentration of good teaching.

Last year's leavers, an able group, made very good progress from Year 3 to Year 6 and reached standards that were significantly above the national average in English, mathematics and science. The present Year 6 pupils have made equally good progress in Key Stage 2 but are not expected to reach such high standards.

The school's provision for pupils with LDD has improved significantly since the last inspection and, in relation to ability, these pupils do as well as their classmates.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils' personal development is good. They make good progress in this aspect of their learning, including the spiritual, moral, social and cultural elements. Pupils enjoy school and appreciate all the opportunities offered, especially the extra activities, educational visits and visitors. They develop into mature, responsible and thoughtful youngsters who undertake posts of responsibility in school reliably. By upper Key Stage 2, pupils work with a good degree of independence in lessons and on other projects, such as planning a school newspaper.

Pupils have a good range of opportunities to contribute to school life and to the local community. The work of the school council involves all pupils in a democratic process and enables them to make a difference to their school. In lessons, thoughtfulness and personal responsibility are promoted well, for instance in relation to issues in relationships, such as forgiveness, and about the environment. Pupils are mostly very well-behaved in lessons and around the school. That said, behaviour in lessons slips to satisfactory when teachers' expectations are less high, and there are instances of rough outdoor play.

Pupils have a good understanding of healthy lifestyles. They are active and welcome the opportunities for sport and other physical exercise. They appreciate the healthy

school meals. Pupils are well-prepared for the next stage of their education, with personal attributes and good basic skills, and they learn about the world of work.

Attendance is broadly average.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good overall. The impact is evident in pupils' good achievement. Pupils are keen to learn and they try hard. Two strengths are seen in teaching throughout the school. First, relationships between staff and pupils are very positive. Second, teaching assistants are deployed well and they make a strong contribution to pupils' learning. Teaching is most effective in Key Stage 2, where much is of a very good quality and expectations for what pupils can achieve and for the quality of their work are high. For children in Reception and Year 1, teaching is satisfactory overall.

The most effective lessons move along at a brisk pace, there is a purposeful, industrious atmosphere, and all pupils are enabled to keep up. The work is well-organised to meet the needs of pupils' of different ages and abilities and a range of methods are used, so every pupil can learn effectively.

When teaching is not of this high quality, expectations for achievement, behaviour and pace of learning are lower and sometimes opportunities to extend or reinforce learning are missed.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school provides a good curriculum that is matched well to pupils' needs and ensures progression in learning in mixed-age classes. It provides very well for pupils' personal development and well for their academic learning.

Provision for pupils with LDD is organised efficiently. Extra help in lessons and small group sessions is focused carefully on these pupils' particular needs and helps them to keep up. The curriculum for children in Reception covers all the required areas of learning satisfactorily but there is scope to improve the provision for these young children to learn through play.

A good range of extra activities of good quality is provided. Some of these run during school hours so all pupils can join in, even though it is difficult for those who travel a distance to stay after school. A good range of visits and visitors successfully broadens pupils' horizons and enhances their awareness and understanding of the locality.

Pupils' awareness of cultural diversity is promoted well, despite the school's isolation and virtually mono-cultural nature. The links being established with places called

Alston around the world have good potential to further enrich the provision for pupils' cultural development.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Care guidance and support are good. Pastoral care is very good. The school plays a key role in multi-agency work to support and protect any vulnerable pupils. Staff keep a close eye on new pupils to make sure they settle in and make friends. Arrangements for safeguarding pupils are in place. Displays around the school contribute to the good guidance and support offered to pupils. They spell out just what it means to 'work and play hard, fair and safe', and pupils understand this, for instance the safety routines for physical education. Equally, although bullying is rare, pupils know how to deal with it and the 'run, yell and tell' message is reinforced around the school. Academic guidance varies from satisfactory to very good. Some marking of work and setting of targets is very effective and pupils know exactly how well they have done and how to do better. In some other cases marking is cursory and pupils' targets are not so precise.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Since the previous inspection, there have been changes of key staff and in the governing body. The great improvement in the last two years, particularly in standards and teaching, shows the good leadership and management provided by the present senior team. The staff work well together. They share a clear educational vision; commitment to pupils doing well and ambition for the school's future. They are supported very well by knowledgeable and proactive governors who make a strong contribution to the drive for improvement.

The school needed to make progress on many fronts simultaneously in order to overcome its weaknesses. This has been achieved. It is now time to take stock and determine the main priorities for short and medium term development to enable the school to continue moving forward and realise its ambitions.

A key factor in raising standards has been the effective systems the school has developed for keeping track of pupils' progress term by term. A very useful data base is being built up. Senior staff can see if pupils are doing as well as they should in each class; set targets for their achievement and make sure that extra support is placed where it is most needed. When pupils do better than expected, targets are revised upwards. Even so, expectations could be higher still in Key Stage 1.

Staff who lead the school's work in each subject do this in both schools. So, for instance, the teacher who leads on mathematics is based at Nenthead. This arrangement works well in English and mathematics, with the subject leaders having good, detailed knowledge about pupils' progress and the strengths and areas for development in the subject at Alston. However, leadership is not as well-developed in some of the other subjects so pupils' progress and the quality of provision are more dependent on each

class teacher. As a result, expectations vary and, although there is some very good work, there is some that is mundane and not as challenging as it might be.

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Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The quality and standards in the Foundation Stage	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The behaviour of learners	2
The attendance of learners	3
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Alston Primary School

Garrigill Road

Alston

Cumbria

CA9 3UF

15 February 2007

Dear Children

As you know, I came to your school recently, with John Young HMI, to find out how well all the children are learning. Everyone made us welcome and helped us to find out about your school. I am especially grateful to all the children who talked to John and me and told us about what it's like to be a pupil at your school. Please thank them for me. This letter is to tell you what I found out.

Your school has improved a lot since it was last inspected, just over two years ago. The headteacher, the staff and the school's governors have worked very hard to achieve this. They now have to decide what are the most important things to do next. I am certain they can do this and make the school even better.

There are two main reasons why Alston Primary School is now a good school. Firstly, children make good progress in their learning, particularly in English and mathematics, which are very important subjects. The staff are going to make sure you do equally well in other subjects all through the school. I know, from what we saw in lessons, and from talking to groups of children, that you try hard because you want to do well. The second reason why yours is a good school is that it is very successful at helping you become more responsible and independent as you grow older. We were pleased to see that you carry out responsible jobs at school, like being librarians and answering the telephone and, by the time you are in the top class, you work with a good degree of independence in lessons. In most of the lessons we saw children were very sensible and well-behaved.

I believe you are taught well and the staff take good care of you. I think you are taught best in the junior classes where the teachers expect a great deal of you. You know exactly what you need to do to improve your work and you rise to the challenge. I have asked the school to make sure that children progress this well in all classes.

For you, the important thing is to carry on working and playing hard, fair and safe. This includes challenging yourselves to reach the highest possible standards in everything you do at school. I am sure you will have some good ideas to contribute to the plans for developing and improving your school.

You have my very best wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely

Pat Kime

Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools