

# Combs Middle School

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	124820
<b>Local Authority</b>	SUFFOLK
<b>Inspection number</b>	293122
<b>Inspection dates</b>	16–17 May 2007
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Stephen Abbott HMI

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

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<b>Type of school</b>	Middle deemed secondary
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	9–13
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number on roll</b>	
School	443
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Mrs Mary Williams
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mr Ian Crissell
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	24 September 2001
<b>School address</b>	Lavenham Way Stowmarket Suffolk IP14 2BZ
<b>Telephone number</b>	01449 674666
<b>Fax number</b>	01449 775282

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## Introduction

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

## Description of the school

Combs Middle School is an average sized middle school drawing most of its pupils from the southern half of Stowmarket, an area consisting mainly of owner-occupied houses and former local authority housing. The number of pupils has been rising in recent years and the school draws significant numbers from other parts of the town and nearby villages. Standards are in line with national expectations when pupils join the school at the beginning of Year 5. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities is in line with the national average, as is the percentage with statements of special educational needs. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is slightly below average. Most pupils are from a White British background. There are very few pupils with minority ethnic backgrounds and almost all pupils speak English as their first language.

## Key for inspection grades

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

## Overall effectiveness of the school

### Grade: 2

Combs Middle School is an effective school where pupils make good progress in their learning and personal development. The school has good links with the local community and forms effective partnerships with other schools, including the Gipping Valley Project. The school has good capacity for further improvement and provides good value for money. Governors are effective in holding the school to account. Leadership and management are good at all levels and the improvement strategies are working well. Leaders monitor performance well, but until the inspection they did not have convincing data analysis to support their belief that progress over time was good, and cautiously evaluated progress as satisfactory. This problem of evaluation is faced by many middle schools because National Curriculum assessments are made in Years 6 and 9 and so it is not always clear how much of the progress made in this time is due to the middle school and how much is due to the primary and high schools.

Using the most recent assessments of pupils' work, inspectors established that pupils' make good progress between joining in Year 5 and leaving in Year 8. This is an improvement that has been driven by senior leaders in reaction to a dip in results in 2004. The strategy has been to improve both teaching and support for pupils. Standards are now above average because the quality of teaching is good. Most lessons are effective because teachers' planning includes a variety of engaging lesson activities and addresses the needs of all pupils. Pupils usually know what they are expected to learn and this helps them to make good progress. However, in a few lessons, teachers' planning does not distinguish well enough between what pupils will do and what they will learn.

Pupils' attendance and behaviour are good. They are safeguarded well, enjoy school and contribute effectively to the community. The great majority of pupils behave very well. The school has a tradition of good care, guidance and support and a strong commitment to including pupils with a range of additional learning needs. Pupils' progress is now monitored closely in lessons so that underachievement is tackled quickly. The curriculum includes good provision for literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) and it is being enhanced by a new approach to Key Stage 3, which will be completed by Year 8 in the future. Indications are that this will suit pupils who are already reaching Year 9 standards by the end of Year 8.

A few parents commented on not having enough notice of some events or cancellations. Others expressed concern about the disruptive impact of a small minority of pupils with emotional or behavioural difficulties. The school has now developed effective ways of including and supporting these pupils whilst limiting the impact of any classroom disruption. The school is keen to increase its work in partnership with parents. One example is the mathematics class for parents, which helps them to support their children's learning.

### What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that data on pupils' progress is held in a coherent and consistent way so that it can support self-evaluation.
- Ensure that teachers consistently explain the learning objectives to pupils so that they know what they should learn and can assess their own progress.
- Improve communication with parents, both to listen to their concerns and to share with them the successes of the school.

## **Achievement and standards**

### **Grade: 2**

Pupils achieve well at Combs Middle School. They make good progress between joining the school in Year 5 and leaving in Year 8, meeting challenging targets. Pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities achieve well because they receive good support with their learning and personal development. Within this broadly positive picture, girls do not achieve quite as well as boys. Standards are good in English and science and they are improving in mathematics and ICT. The subject leaders have each developed a range of booster classes, revision sessions and practice papers. More importantly, pupils are making good progress because they are taught well in most lessons and because their progress is now monitored carefully.

Recent improvements to the school's assessment and monitoring of pupils' progress have given a clearer picture in relation to standards and achievement. The school's own assessments, which were checked by inspectors, show that Year 8 pupils are currently matching the nationally expected standards for Year 9. In national tests, Combs Middle School pupils usually reach standards that are average at the end of Year 6 and above average at the end of Year 9. Although there is no precise information about these pupils' level of attainment when they join the school, even by the most cautious estimate, their progress is good between Years 5 and 8. In the future, the school should be able to measure progress more accurately because local primary schools have started to use a national test at the end of Year 4, the first results of which showed standards to be average.

## **Personal development and well-being**

### **Grade: 2**

The personal development and well-being of pupils is good. They behave well, have positive attitudes to school and enjoy their lessons. Pupils cooperate well and most have a well established sense of right and wrong. Relationships with adults are very good and, in the rare instances when pupils misbehave, they almost all respond well when reminded of the school's expectations. Attendance is good because pupils enjoy school and there are robust procedures for following up absence. Pupils' moral and social development is at least good. Spiritual and cultural development is satisfactory because some pupils have a limited awareness of the diverse nature of cultures and beliefs. They gain a sense of community through assemblies, class and year group activities, including the school council. They also have opportunities to contribute to the local community through events and fund-raising. Pupils' literacy, numeracy and team-working skills are well developed to help them in their future working lives. They adopt safe practices in and around school and are well prepared to manage risks outside school. Pupils know the benefits of exercise and a balanced diet but do not always reflect this in their choice of break-time snacks.

## **Quality of provision**

### **Teaching and learning**

#### **Grade: 2**

Teaching and learning are good. Teachers are confident and well organised in preparing active and engaging lessons that cater well for the different needs of pupils. Many lessons include a good mixture of independent and guided learning where pupils know their individual targets and respond well to the appropriate level of challenge. Most lessons benefit from good rapport

between pupils and their teachers, and good classroom management. Learning support assistants usually contribute well to the progress made by pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities, both in the class and especially through extra support. In the most effective lessons, teachers make frequent reference to what they want pupils to learn. This helps the pupils to know how well they are getting on. These teachers use a variety of methods to assess pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding, and adapt their teaching accordingly. They set and mark homework regularly. Marking is often good but occasionally provides too little feedback to help pupils to improve. In the small minority of less effective lessons, teachers' planning and their lesson introductions focus on what they want pupils to do rather than what they expect them to learn. In these circumstances, pupils sometimes complete the tasks set for them in a way that misses the point.

## **Curriculum and other activities**

### **Grade: 2**

The curriculum meets the needs and interests of pupils well. It promotes good health and safe lifestyles, especially through personal, social and health education, citizenship and physical education. Many pupils also participate in the range of sports available. Planning within departments is good and literacy, numeracy and ICT skills are developed well through a variety of subjects. Trips and activities make an important contribution to pupils' personal development and enrich their learning. There is currently no provision for studying a language in Year 5 and music has no specialist teacher. However, the good range of extra-curricular activities includes opportunities for pupils interested in these areas and possibilities for the more able pupils to enrich and extend their learning. There is a well considered plan to cover the Key Stage 3 curriculum over two years in the future, so that national assessments can be taken before pupils transfer to high school.

## **Care, guidance and support**

### **Grade: 2**

Care, guidance and support are good. The school is a welcoming place for pupils and adults. It provides a very caring and supportive environment in which the vast majority of pupils feel happy and safe. Pupils know that adults will listen to any concerns they might have. The school council gives pupils a degree of influence in how the school is run. They have championed improvements to facilities for example. Procedures for safeguarding pupils are good. Health and safety checks are made regularly and the building is suitably adapted for wheelchair users. The school works very successfully with outside agencies to help pupils with learning disabilities or additional needs. This includes a small number of pupils who sometimes struggle to control their emotions and behaviour. The school employs an effective range of strategies to minimise disruption, including proactive measures like anger management sessions. The recently introduced systems for tracking pupils' achievements are leading to active intervention with those at risk of underachievement. This is reflected in the good progress made by most pupils.

## **Leadership and management**

### **Grade: 2**

Leadership and management are effective. Following a dip in performance in 2004, the school responded by focusing strongly on improving standards. The senior team introduced initiatives for improving the quality of teaching and learning, making good use of the complementary

strengths of the headteacher and deputy and drawing on local authority support. The appointment of an assistant headteacher and a senior teacher boosted the role of academic monitoring and strengthened learning support. An effective system is being established which enables subject leaders to identify pupils who need extra lessons or other interventions. The school's monitoring shows that teaching continues to improve and planning is well advanced for changes to the Key Stage 3 curriculum. The recent recruitment of some very effective subject leaders has had a considerable impact on the quality of provision. The school has appropriate plans to increase its capacity for improvement by training the most effective teachers to coach their colleagues.

Although the improvement programme has had some success, the school has not secured reliable data to measure how well pupils progress between Years 5 and 8, a problem compounded by the accidental loss of some data from previous years. Strenuous efforts were made during the inspection to collate the available information. Some of the evidence was relatively recent, but more could have been done earlier to improve the rigour of the school's self-evaluation. Procedures are now in place to maintain efficient records and the school should be in a position to evaluate more effectively in the future.

The governing body provides effective challenge and support. One of its strengths is its willingness to review its own practice and to address weaknesses through governor training. The school has addressed the issues raised in its last report.





## Annex A

## Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	<b>School Overall</b>
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### Overall effectiveness

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

### Achievement and standards

<b>How well do learners achieve?</b>	2
The standards <sup>1</sup> 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

<b>How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?</b>	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The behaviour of learners	2
The attendance of learners	2
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3
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

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Annex A

**Leadership and management**

<b>How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?</b>	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	3
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

18 May 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Combs Middle School, Stowmarket, IP14 2BZ

I am writing to tell you about your school's inspection. First, I want to thank all of you, on behalf of the inspection team, for being so helpful during the inspection and answering our questions.

We think that Combs Middle School is a good school. It is well led by Mr Crissell and the senior team and you are lucky to have some very dedicated staff. They have worked hard to improve the school and their hard work has paid off. You do well at school because of the good teaching in most of your lessons. We found that by Year 8, many of you have already reached the levels expected in Year 9.

The school provides well for those of you who find it difficult to learn or need support to behave well. It makes sure that anyone who is falling behind gets the extra help they need. Adults look after you well, making sure that you grow into sensible and well behaved young people. Most of you told us that you enjoy school and we were impressed by your good behaviour and the way you work for each other and your community. Members of the school council told us that the school listens to your views.

We have a few suggestions to improve the school.

- Keep better information about your National Curriculum levels as you move up the school, so that it can prove to everyone how well you are doing.
- Get all teachers to tell you what you are expected to learn in their lessons (most already do this).
- Work more closely with your parents, keeping them well informed about the school and listening to their concerns.

I hope that your school will carry on the good work and wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott HMI

Lead Inspector