



Birchwood CofE Primary School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 111304
Local Authority Warrington
Inspection number 295666
Inspection dates 31 October –1 November 2006
Reporting inspector Marguerite McCloy HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 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 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Primary	School address	The Mount
School category	Voluntary aided		Admirals Road, Birchwood
Age range of pupils	3–11		Warrington, Cheshire WA3 6QG
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01925 823316
Number on roll (school)	276	Fax number	01925 824898
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Ms Debi Ost
		Headteacher	Mrs EA Williams
Date of previous school inspection	26 April 1999		

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
3–11	31 October –1 November 2006	295666

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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Birchwood Church of England Primary is an average sized primary school situated in an area of Warrington which is characterised by higher than average levels of social and economic disadvantage. The majority of pupils are of White British heritage. A small number of pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds and two of these are at the early stages of learning English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above average, as is the proportion entitled to free school meals. An above average number of pupils leave or join the school other than at the start of the academic year. The school building includes the local centre for worship and the village hall.

When Birchwood Church of England Primary School was inspected in June 2005 it was judged to require special measures due to unsatisfactory standards, attendance and leadership. Subsequently, monitoring visits were carried out by HMI in the spring and summer terms 2006. This inspection is the result of the third monitoring visit.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

In accordance with section 13 (4) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures.

Since its last inspection, the school has worked successfully to improve standards, achievement, attendance and leadership. The school now provides a satisfactory and improving education for its pupils.

A significant number of children enter the Nursery with well below average skills. They make good progress in the Foundation Stage as a result of the good teaching and provision in a well organised and equipped learning environment.

By the time pupils leave the school, they are reaching standards of attainment which are in line with the national average in English, and just below in mathematics and science. The downward trend in pupils' achievement which was evident in 2005 has now been halted. All pupils, including those with special educational needs or higher achievers, make satisfactory progress. The rate of recent improvements is leading to more pupils making good or better progress within some lessons.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall and an increasing proportion is now better than this as teachers develop their knowledge of what makes a lesson outstanding. The assessment of pupils' progress and attainment in English and mathematics is satisfactory and teachers are beginning to use the information well to set targets for groups of pupils. There are some excellent examples of how teachers mark work so that pupils clearly know how to improve it. This good practice, however, is not yet consistent across the school.

Most pupils enjoy coming to school and work and play harmoniously. As a result of positive relationships and the level of care which adults give to them, pupils feel safe and understand the importance of staying healthy. These factors, along with pupils' enjoyment of most lessons and activities, contribute to the school's improved attendance which is now near the national average. The curriculum is satisfactory overall with some strengths. It is being developed creatively in order to excite pupils and motivate them to improve their learning.

The school provides satisfactory value for money and capacity to improve because senior managers and governors, with support from the local authority, have identified its strengths and weaknesses and taken positive actions leading to improvement. Middle managers are beginning to be more involved in this process. The pace of change over the last year has been rapid, so much so that the school has not been rigorous enough in checking the impact of its actions on improving performance.

Leadership and management are satisfactory and improving. The headteacher and deputy work well together and articulate a clear vision for the development of the school. They have the respect of staff who are equally committed to whole school improvement and the further development of their own skills. Staff morale and teamwork are strong and positive relationships exist with parents, carers and the local community.

What the school should do to improve further

- Strengthen the quality of teaching so that it is more consistently good or better and all pupils are excited and challenged in their learning.
- Build on the improvements already made, raise standards and improve achievement in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science.
- Improve evaluation procedures to provide a more rigorous analysis of the impact of the school's actions on raising pupils' achievement.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Achievement and standards are satisfactory. This represents good progress since the school was placed in special measures in 2005 when achievement and standards were not good enough.

When children enter the school, a significant number have skills which are well below average, especially in communication and language development. As a result of the good provision in the Foundation Stage, the majority of pupils are in line to reach the learning goals expected of them by the start of Year 1. Standards have now risen so that they are broadly in line with the national average by the end of Year 2, as shown in the 2006 assessments.

The national test results for Year 6 pupils in 2005 were well below average and indicated inadequate progress for many of them. Since the last inspection report, good progress has been made in raising achievement. The 2006 results were significantly better as a result of improvements in teaching, target setting, staffing stability and leadership and management. Standards reached the national average in English and just below in mathematics and science. Although the proportion of pupils achieving higher levels in all three core subjects was below the national average it was, nevertheless, an improvement on 2005 and the school exceeded some of its own challenging targets.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Pupils' personal development and well-being are satisfactory overall with some good aspects. Their spiritual and moral development is good and is underpinned by the strong Christian values at the heart of the school. Pupils cooperate well with each other and behaviour is generally good.

Initiatives to improve attendance and punctuality are paying dividends. The school has tightened its monitoring procedures and introduced rewards for good attendance. The importance of this is being reinforced with parents, who respond more positively to the school's higher expectations. As a result, attendance improved significantly to just below the national average in 2005/06 and this improvement has been sustained during the current year to date. The number of pupils arriving late to school has decreased.

Pupils understand the importance of leading healthy lifestyles. Large numbers take part in the good range of sporting activities after school. They feel safe in school and value teachers' efforts to care for them. One pupil expressed the views of many when he said, 'Teachers really care about us and are there to help us when we need help'.

Pupils value the school council and the improvements it has brought about such as the raising of funds to purchase a climbing frame. Older pupils enjoy taking positions of responsibility such as becoming prefects or acting as buddies to younger children. Pupils engage in raising money for a variety of charities both at home and abroad.

The pupils' satisfactory development of basic skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) means they are well equipped to take advantage of the next steps in their learning.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall with good features, although not yet consistent across the school. In a growing number of lessons where teaching is good or better, activities are stimulating and challenging and, as a result, pupils enjoy their learning and make good progress. Effective use of questioning to develop pupils' thinking and extend their understanding promotes learning well, although it is not always focused on raising the challenge for pupils with a higher ability. In the best lessons, activities are carefully structured to match the needs of all pupils so that they are absorbed in their work. In a Year 6 problem-solving lesson, the excellent relationships and exciting, practical tasks led to outstanding progress. Pupils explained that, 'our teacher doesn't make us work, but makes learning so much fun that we want to work'.

On occasions, however, teaching is not always challenging or stimulating enough and this results in pupils making only satisfactory progress in lessons. When teachers' expectations of what pupils should learn are not focused enough, tasks do not always keep pupils' interest or maintain their concentration. On occasions teachers talk for too long, causing some pupils to become passive or restless. In these lessons, the pace of learning is slow and this particularly affects those pupils who need a more structured and supportive learning environment in order to behave appropriately.

Most teachers use ICT well to make learning fun and exciting. This helps to engage the pupils and, consequently, they make good progress in these lessons. In a Year 3 French lesson, for example, the teacher used the interactive whiteboard to good effect to encourage pupils to learn the names for various colours.

Very good relationships between adults and children are a feature of the school which makes a positive contribution to the learning environment. Pupils support and encourage each other in their learning, sharing in each other's success.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The school provides a curriculum that is broad and balanced. It recognises that in order to improve pupils' motivation to learn and enhance their basic skills, the curriculum can be made more exciting. Teachers are beginning to develop an imaginative range of approaches to planning the curriculum in order to make effective links between subjects and areas of learning. Provision in the well resourced Foundation Stage is buzzing with opportunities for children to learn inside as well as outdoors. This good practice is being introduced into older classes. Pupils in Year 6 explained how, 'for some of us who find writing hard the role play has really helped us'. Although these developments are in their early stages, they are already showing good signs of engaging children more actively in their learning. The school is successfully developing the role homework plays in the curriculum: pupils were keen to display their excellent Greek models made as part of a home project. This approach is also engaging parents more in their children's learning as an alternative to mathematics or writing-based tasks.

A variety of after school clubs ensure pupils have the opportunity to try things they may otherwise not get the chance to do: rock climbing, for example. As part of the school sports partnership with the local high school, specialist teachers provide support in Key Stage 2 PE and games. French is now an established part of the curriculum for older pupils during the school day.

From the youngest age, children in the Foundation Stage are provided with a wide range of activities in a well organised and stimulating environment. The provision for outdoor learning is also well used and teachers make the most of every opportunity to develop children's understanding of their environment, even in wet and windy weather.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

The quality of care provided for pupils is satisfactory. Procedures for safeguarding children meet the current requirements and health and safety procedures are well established. Risk assessments are secure. Pupils confirm that they generally feel safe and well cared for at school and one voiced the views of many saying, 'our teachers get any problems we have sorted quickly'.

Support for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is satisfactory. Skilled teaching assistants are used effectively to support these pupils and monitor their progress. Pupils are becoming increasingly involved in assessing their own learning aided by targets for literacy and numeracy. There are some excellent examples of how pupils are guided to improve their work through the effective marking. This good practice, however, is not yet consistent across all classes.

Arrangements for supporting children when they join the school and as they move into new classes are very good. Pupils are also well supported and feel confident when moving to secondary school.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Leadership and management are satisfactory with some areas of strength and this represents good progress since the 2005 inspection when it was judged to be unsatisfactory.

The leadership team have taken every opportunity to benefit from the advice and support given by local authority consultants and advisers. The permanent appointment of the deputy headteacher following her secondment to the school has improved the stability of leadership and management and enabled more effective delegation of responsibilities. Middle managers are gaining confidence in their roles and are beginning to take a more active part in school monitoring and evaluation.

The school's assessment procedures continue to improve and systems are in place to systematically track the progress of pupils. As a result, the leadership team has recently reviewed and raised the targets set for Year 6 pupils in 2007. Based on the previous attainment of these pupils, the targets are now more challenging and reflect the raised expectations of the school as a whole.

Governors are well informed and involved in the school's strategic planning. They play a key role in the development of the school and have the renewed confidence to question all aspects of its provision. Along with senior leaders, they have a strong awareness of what the school does well and what could be better and are well focused on the school's key priorities for improvement.

Although the leadership team has an accurate view of the overall quality of teaching, it does not have detailed plans of how to improve teaching further so that it is consistently good or better across the school.

Since the last inspection, the school has developed a parent council which meets regularly. This, in addition to regular newsletters, contributes to the positive relationships and communication with parents and carers.

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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?	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The quality and standards in the Foundation Stage	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3

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?	3
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	3
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
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

Thank you for your help when we recently inspected your school. You may remember that this was my third visit to the school, because I have been checking its progress since the last inspection in June 2005. At that time the school was put into 'special measures' because it was not giving you a satisfactory education.

I am very pleased to tell you that the school has made good improvement in quite a short time since then, because it no longer needs 'special measures'. Your headteacher, deputy and governors have improved the leadership and management of the school. All the staff have worked hard to make sure that you reach the standards that are expected of you. Another important improvement is that attendance is better than it was and more of you come to school on time and ready to learn. I hope you carry on making this even better and that your parents continue to support the school by making sure you attend unless you really are not well enough!

We know you have noticed the improvements too. You have always been happy in school and like the way adults care for you, but now you also feel that more of your lessons are enjoyable and exciting and the inspectors agree. We have asked the school to try to make sure that all of your lessons are like this, so that you can learn even more. We also think that the school leaders could make more detailed checks on everything they do to make sure those things are helping you to achieve the best you possibly can.

You get a good start to school life in the Nursery and Reception classes, with lots of interesting activities inside and outside the classroom - even in bad weather! It was interesting to see how the older pupils had worked well at home with their parents on some practical activities linked to the Greek project.

We enjoyed talking to you during the inspection and were impressed by your good behaviour and positive attitudes. It was nice to see you working well together in class, caring for and helping each other. I have particularly enjoyed seeing the improvements in your school this year and wish you all the best for the future as you go from strength to strength!