

Mill Vale School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109663
Local Authority	BEDFORDSHIRE
Inspection number	300105
Inspection dates	21–22 March 2007
Reporting inspector	Alan Alder HMI

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

Type of school	Middle deemed secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	9–13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	541
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Headteacher	Mr Peter McCreadie
Date of previous school inspection	30 November 2005
School address	Wilbury Drive Dunstable Bedfordshire LU5 4QP
Telephone number	01582 523000
Fax number	01582 523010

Age group	9–13
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Additional Inspectors. When the school was inspected in December 2005, it was given a notice to improve because it was performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could reasonably be expected to perform. Significant improvement was required in relation to pupils' achievement and standards.

Description of the school

Mill Vale Middle School is situated in a residential area in East Dunstable. The majority of pupils at the school are from White British backgrounds though there is a growing number from minority ethnic backgrounds, the largest group being from Asian or Asian British-Indian families. However, very few pupils speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities, including those with statements of special educational needs, is below average. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is also lower than the national average. Standards of pupils on entering the school are average.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The school's overall effectiveness is now satisfactory and it has made satisfactory improvement since last inspected. In accordance with section 13 (5) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement. However, its performance in two aspects remains inadequate. Before its next section 5 inspection, Ofsted inspectors may visit the school to monitor the progress it has made in remedying these weaknesses. The school would receive two to five days notice of such a visit.

The school's leaders have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, and recognise that, despite some significant improvements, much remains to be done. Leadership is therefore judged to be satisfactory overall, as is the school's value for money and capacity for further improvement. Nonetheless, although there is some good practice, there is still far too much variability in the quality of teaching and other provision and too little effective monitoring of performance, particularly by subject leaders.

Pupils make satisfactory, though uneven, progress and the standards they reach are broadly average. This reflects the quality of teaching which they receive. The relatively small number of pupils who have learning difficulties make inadequate progress. A small proportion of lessons are of good quality, most are satisfactory and about one in ten is inadequate. The school's leaders and managers review the quality of teaching regularly and take steps to improve it. However, some subject leaders are not having sufficient impact on improving pupils' learning. The management of subject leaders by the school's senior leaders is inconsistent, which contributes to this.

The curriculum is satisfactory. It gives pupils satisfactory skills for the workplace and for their future economic well-being, though pupils' computing and writing skills are comparatively weak. The recently developed approach to assessing the progress which pupils make in different subjects is being used well to identify who needs extra teaching, as well as to monitor the progress made in different teaching groups. This work is bringing about an important shift in the school's expectations of what pupils are capable of as well as in levels of accountability of the school's leaders and managers. There is a reasonable provision for physical education and the school gives good emphasis to healthy eating. It provides healthy food, and seeks to influence the choices of those who bring their own packed lunch, though with mixed results. There is a satisfactory provision of extra-curricular activities, including a recent and substantial increase in those taking instrumental tuition. The increased emphasis on additional lessons to compensate for previously poor progress in key subjects such as English and mathematics is beginning to make a difference.

The spiritual, moral and social development of pupils is satisfactory. Pupils say they feel safe in school and attendance is good, but some are concerned about the open access that outsiders have to the school's site. This concern is shared by some parents. Pupils' contribution to the community is satisfactory, as is their enjoyment of school.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the progress made by pupils, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, by improving the quality of teaching.
- Ensure greater rigour in the monitoring of the school's work by its leaders and managers.

- Provide greater support for, and accountability of subject leaders to ensure that they are more effective in bringing about improvements.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

The progress which pupils make is satisfactory. When pupils enter the school in Year 5 their standards in English and mathematics are similar to those found nationally. By the end of Year 6 the national tests in 2006 showed that, in both subjects, pupils' standards had not kept pace with national expectations. The 2006 results nevertheless were an improvement on those of 2005, but the progress which pupils made in English was inadequate. Most children from minority ethnic groups made satisfactory progress, but children with learning difficulties or disabilities made inadequate progress. Recent assessment data provided by the school shows that progress has improved. Evidence from lessons confirms this judgement. The current Year 6 are making good progress in mathematics. In science and English progress is now satisfactory, though there remain weaknesses in writing. In Years 7 and 8 the school's data shows that pupils make uneven progress, but it is satisfactory overall. It is good in science and mathematics in Year 7, and satisfactory in Year 8. In English, progress is inadequate in Year 7 and good in Year 8. Observations of pupils' work in lessons and in their books shows that the picture in Year 7 in English is improving.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Pupils' attendance is good. The school has been successful in reducing the number of holidays taken during school time. Behaviour around the school is satisfactory. There are, however, instances of disruption in some lessons. This occurs when there is a lack of skill in classroom control, where pupils lack the ability to concentrate well or when the work is not sufficiently challenging. Standards of courtesy are not yet sufficiently well developed in some pupils, although the school is working hard to underline the importance of being welcoming to others. There are satisfactory procedures to find out about, and deal with, bullying, but younger pupils say that they are sometimes intimidated by older pupils. Pupils show growing self-confidence and an increasingly mature outlook as they move up through the school. Their appreciation of cultural diversity is, however, underdeveloped. Pupils contribute satisfactorily to the life of the school through the school council and their work as duty monitors, reading buddies, sports captains and house captains. Involvement in fundraising for charities contributes to their financial and social understanding.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The quality of teaching and learning is broadly satisfactory but varies greatly. Pupils are taught by specialist teachers who know their subjects well but the planning of lessons is still too variable in quality. The best lessons include a good variety of activities that challenge pupils to think, keep them interested and ensure they work at a good pace. In these lessons, pupils' progress is very good. In some lessons the preliminary activities lack meaningful content and occupy too great a proportion of the lesson. The most able students are generally not sufficiently challenged and in most lessons are given the same work as other pupils. In too many lessons

pupils are expected to learn passively, with insufficient opportunities for independent work. Some lessons, for example in science, lack a clear purpose and are filled with time consuming activities which lead to little learning. Most work is marked regularly but the giving of advice on how to improve work, whilst good on occasions, is inconsistent. The emphasis given to pupils' understanding of specialist terms is good, but other literacy skills such as writing are insufficiently developed.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The curriculum is satisfactory. It meets statutory requirements and has some good features, such as the recent introduction of French in Year 6. Specialist facilities are good. In some subjects the curriculum is unbalanced. There is not sufficient opportunity for pupils to learn investigative skills in science, for example, nor to stimulate boys' writing in English. Banding and setting by ability have been introduced in Years 6 to 8, and this has enabled teaching to be more focused on the needs of pupils with different abilities. The school's programme for personal, social and health education is satisfactorily planned.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Arrangements for the care, guidance and support of pupils are satisfactory. Child protection procedures meet requirements. There is effective liaison with the pupils' first schools and pupils arriving in Year 5 are helped to settle into school routines well. Staff are generally helpful and observant, and most know pupils well.

The use of target setting is generally developing effectively. Targets are now satisfactorily challenging. The means of identifying those pupils who are underachieving are good and there are more robust steps taken to help them improve. Pupils are aware of their current levels of attainment and what they need to do to reach the next level. However, there are weaknesses in improving the progress being made by pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities. Recent data shows that they are still not making adequate progress.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The progress the school has made since it was inspected in 2005 is, after a slow start, satisfactory. In the last two terms a more systematic approach has been taken by the school's leaders to bring about improvement. There is now a stronger commitment to this across the school, and there is a greater willingness on the part of the school's leaders to hold others to account when their performance is unsatisfactory. There is more responsibility given to subject leaders to monitor the progress being made in their subjects, for example by observing lessons and scrutinising the work of pupils, and to bring about improvements. Monitoring records are used along with the data about pupils' progress to make judgements about the effectiveness of teaching. However, the degree of support and challenge for these leaders is too variable in quality and frequency and, as a result, their effectiveness is too variable.

Whilst the school has some good systems for bringing about improvement, they are not being applied consistently and this reduces their impact. The result is that there remain some areas of inadequacy, for example in applying the school's policy and guidance on teaching a good

lesson. There are not sufficient opportunities for teachers to learn from others' good practice and so develop their own. Assessment data is not routinely analysed to track how much progress is being made by pupils with learning difficulties.

The governing body has a good awareness of the school's strengths and weaknesses and how it is developing. It is providing satisfactory challenge and is aware of where its own shortcomings lie.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	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?	3
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	4

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	3
The behaviour of learners	3
The attendance of learners	2
How well learners enjoy their education	3
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3
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.

Annex A

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	3
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	4
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

23 March 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Mill Vale Middle School, Wilbury Drive, Dunstable, Bedfordshire, LU5 4QP

Thank you for being so welcoming and helpful during our inspection. We met and spoke to quite a number of you when we visited, and your comments were very useful. I'd like to let you know what we found out.

Your school has improved since it was last inspected four terms ago. Your learning is better, you are much more aware of your targets and what you need to do to reach them. The curriculum has improved too, with French being taught in Year 6, and more of you are now learning a musical instrument. We were pleased that your attendance is still good. Your school's leaders do a lot to encourage you to eat healthily.

Although your school is better, there are still a number of improvements needed. For example, the progress you make in your learning needs to increase, including those of you with learning difficulties. Some of the teaching we saw was good and some outstanding. To help you to improve the progress you make, more teaching needs to be as good as this. We have suggested to your school's leaders what should be done to bring this about. This includes giving those teachers who are in charge of subjects more help in changing things for the better.

We have suggested that your school is visited by an inspector before the next inspection, to make sure that the improvements are taking place.

Best wishes for your future,

Alan Alder

Her Majesty's Inspector.