

Woodland Middle School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109687
Local Authority	BEDFORDSHIRE LA
Inspection number	310063
Inspection dates	10–11 December 2007
Reporting inspector	Rhona Seviour 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	671
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Mandy Wilsmore
Headteacher	Mr Jeff Conquest
Date of previous school inspection	29 November 2004
School address	Malham Close Flitwick Bedford Bedfordshire MK45 1NP
Telephone number	01525 750400
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Age group	9–13
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Woodland is a large middle school that serves a relatively small rural town. Pupils come mainly from three lower schools in the town and the percentage from socially and economically advantaged homes is above the national average. Pupils enter the school with standards that are broadly average. Very few are from ethnic minority backgrounds and the percentage with learning difficulties and disabilities is below average. There are three pupils at an early stage of learning the English language and no looked after children. The school is a member of the Redborne Upper School pyramid and holds both the Healthy Schools' Award and the Sportsmark awards. The new headteacher took up his post in September 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 4

In accordance with legislation, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could reasonably be expected to perform. The school is therefore given a Notice to Improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to pupils' achievement in English, particularly writing, and to teachers' lesson planning, marking and use of assessment.

The school has made inadequate progress since its last inspection. Achievement overall is inadequate. Too many pupils fail to achieve the levels of which they are capable in English, particularly in writing, and this was a key issue in the last inspection. In addition, the school has not monitored or evaluated its work with sufficient rigour with the result that weaknesses in teachers' planning, marking and, as at the time of two previous inspections, their use of assessment, have not been identified or tackled effectively. As a result, the quality of teaching and learning is inadequate. Pupils' attainment is broadly in line with the national averages and, at the end of Year 8, above the national expectations in mathematics and science.

The school has had three headteachers and one acting headteacher in the last four years and has experienced a relatively high number of long-term staff absences. These have affected pupils' achievement and impeded the school's improvement. Many parents rightly expressed concerns about aspects of the school's work. However, like the inspectors, they recognise that the pace of improvement has accelerated rapidly since the appointment of the new headteacher. Well supported by the new chair of governors and a new leadership team, he has taken prompt action to improve the school's systems and the quality of its work. Over the last term, the school has forged closer links with the lower schools, in order to improve pupils' academic progress over four years of Key Stage 2. It has also made good use of the expertise within the local authority to increase the effectiveness of middle leaders. The school's monitoring and evaluation of its work are now satisfactory, although it has not yet evaluated the curriculum to judge, for example, how well it meets the statutory requirements. The school is focused on improving achievement and there are indications that standards are beginning to rise. It is too early to judge the impact of many of the actions taken but it is clear that the school has a satisfactory capacity to improve.

Most pupils enjoy school. They benefit from its specialist facilities and the breadth of the curriculum that includes, for example, the opportunity to learn a foreign language from the time they start at Woodland. In lessons observed by inspectors, pupils contributed positively and worked well together; in most cases, their behaviour was exemplary. However, this is not always the case and weaknesses in teaching, including inconsistent approaches by staff, often contribute to poor behaviour. Provision for caring for pupils and supporting their social development are satisfactory but the close monitoring of pupils' academic progress is still at an early stage. Target setting is not always understood by the pupils or used regularly enough to promote their progress. The school is well resourced and provides satisfactory value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve pupils' achievement in English, particularly in writing.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning, ensuring that lesson planning is more effective in promoting key subject skills, and that these are underpinned by specific opportunities for assessment through activities designed to meet the needs of pupils of all levels of ability.

- Improve the monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum in order to judge its impact on pupils' achievement and to ensure that statutory requirements are met fully.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 4

Standards are broadly in line with the national average but achievement is inadequate. This is because pupils' progress in English has not been good enough to enable them to achieve the high levels they are attaining in mathematics and science, and of which they are capable. Furthermore, the school has made insufficient progress in improving pupils' achievement in English, particularly writing, as this was an issue in the last inspection.

Results in the national tests taken at the end of Year 6 have remained broadly in line with the national average over the last five years. Since then, English results, which were below average at the time of the last inspection, have improved slightly but remain lower than those in mathematics and science. In 2007, the results in both English and science fell and the proportion of pupils achieving the highest level was well below average. The school did not achieve the targets it set itself for attainment in English at the end of Year 6 and fell short of those it set for mathematics.

When they leave the school at the end of Year 8, pupils' attainment is above the national expectations in mathematics and science. In these subjects, pupils make good progress. Pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities also make satisfactory progress. However, although broadly in line with the national expectation, attainment in English, particularly writing, remains too low. Instability in subject leadership and long-term staff absences account, in part, for the lack of any significant or sustained improvement in English. So, too, does the lack of attention given to the development of literacy skills across the curriculum and the school's failure to track pupils' progress well enough. Recent actions are well designed to improve achievement but have not had time to make a significant impact.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Pupils' personal development and well-being are satisfactory. Pupils generally enjoy coming to school and their attendance is above average. They appreciate the wide range of facilities and the extensive enrichment activities. In discussion with inspectors, they spoke of their enjoyment of lessons where the teaching is varied but, in contrast, they find some lessons dull because the teaching lacks appropriate stimulus or challenge. Pupils behave satisfactorily overall. Inspectors saw many lessons in which pupils were respectful and self-disciplined, but both pupils and parents report that in too many lessons lack of control leads to disruption. A significant number of exclusions have been necessary over the past year because of this. Most pupils are co-operative and incidents where they are unpleasant to each other are reducing because of initiatives such as the formation of 'anti-bullying squads'. They feel safe in the school and have confidence that staff, particularly their form teachers, will deal with any problems. Pupils are well aware of what they need to do to keep themselves healthy; they look forward to physical education (PE) lessons and many take an active part in extra-curricular sporting activities.

Pupils willingly take on responsibility and are involved in a good range of activities both in and outside the school. In doing so they make a positive contribution to the school and the wider community, and are developing the confidence and team working skills they need for later life.

The school council, which is elected democratically, has had success with initiatives such as break time sales of healthy food. Pupils' spiritual, moral and social development is satisfactory but pupils have a very limited understanding of cultural diversity.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 4

Although most of the lessons seen during the inspection were satisfactory, with some good features, teaching and learning are unsatisfactory overall. This is because of some important weaknesses in lesson planning and assessment. Most lesson planning lacks sharpness in its promotion of key and subject skills as fundamental objectives for learning. As a result, the teaching does not focus enough on the use of assessment or questioning to ensure pupils understand what they are learning. Marking is inconsistent and not used effectively enough to help pupils know exactly what, and how, to improve. Therefore, pupils do not always understand how they can move on to the next stage in their learning.

The collection of data on pupils' progress has improved significantly during the term but its use by teachers is at an early stage of development. Consequently, targets and objectives for learning do not always aim high enough for all groups of pupils, particularly those with the potential for higher attainment. Furthermore, much of the teaching is overly focused on giving classes information rather than developing pupils' thinking and drawing out their understanding of the topic. Although the school is well equipped with interactive whiteboards and computers, some teachers lack the skills to use these effectively. This restricts the variety of activities within lessons and pupils' opportunities to apply and extend their information and communication technology (ICT) skills.

The school has not yet achieved a common understanding amongst staff as to what constitutes good teaching and learning and, although increasingly rigorous, the monitoring of lessons and pupils' learning is still at an early stage.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The school offers a satisfactory curriculum that meets the needs of the majority of pupils. It is broad and enhanced by specialist resources and teachers, particularly in art, PE, design and technology and science. ICT and personal, social and health education (PSHE), but not yet drama, are timetabled as discrete subjects ensuring all pupils gain a sound experience in these areas. Although adequate for the teaching of most subjects, the time allocated for the teaching of art is quite limited and history and geography receive a disproportionately high time allocation in Years 7 and 8. The school has schemes of work for all subjects but there is inconsistency in the level of detail on work planned to match the range of abilities. The school makes satisfactory provision for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities and has made a start to provide more explicitly for pupils who are gifted and talented. It has also begun to strengthen the development of literacy skills within subject planning. Visits, residential experiences, themed days and visitors enrich the curriculum successfully and there is a wide range of extra-curricular activities, especially in sport. However, there are few music events. The school does not routinely monitor its curriculum to ensure it meets National Curriculum requirements, for example, in citizenship, or evaluate its impact on pupils' achievement.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Arrangements for pupils' care, guidance and support are satisfactory. The needs of the most vulnerable pupils are managed well using external professional support, including behaviour management specialists and a life coach. There are good child protection arrangements and risk assessments are of a high standard. Activities to enhance pupils' social skills and boost their confidence are targeted sensitively at pupils who will benefit from them and all pupils are encouraged to take an active part in extra-curricular activities. Pupils are supported well by their form teachers but are not always sufficiently aware of the progress that they are making in relation to the National Curriculum levels or how to make progress towards their targets. The dining arrangements at lunchtime are far from ideal, particularly for pupils with packed lunches, and parents and pupils are rightly dissatisfied with these. In contrast, parents and pupils are supportive of the new 'values' education initiative in the school and the increased emphasis on rewards through merits, praise postcards and letters home. There are good arrangements to help pupils, particularly those with learning difficulties and disabilities, to cope with the transfer from lower to middle school and to prepare for their move to upper school.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Until recently, the pace of the school's improvement has been too slow. As a result, many of the weaknesses identified in previous inspections persist. In the short time he has been at the school the headteacher has gained a broadly accurate understanding of what it needs to do to improve and, together with the new senior leadership team, he has injected a sense of urgency about the school's improvement and increased its focus on standards. The new chair has brought a similar focus and sharpness to the work of the governing body. Consequently, governors have a secure understanding of the school's achievement and standards and are fulfilling their responsibility to hold the school to account. Because of these developments, the school's leadership and management are satisfactory.

The school is now tracking pupils' progress and analysing their performance more systematically. There is greater recognition, through the targets the school sets, that pupils should be achieving more. The arrangements for the performance management of teaching staff have been strengthened, as has the accountability of middle leaders for achievement and standards within their subject area. The school has rightly identified the need to strengthen the effectiveness of middle leaders, many of whom are relatively new or inexperienced. Good support from the local authority is increasing their expertise. However, monitoring and evaluation, although improving, is not consistently rigorous. For example, not all middle leaders are confident or skilful enough in their ability to observe their colleagues or judge accurately the quality of teaching, and its impact on learning. As a result, the school has overestimated the quality of its teaching.

The majority of staff are enthused by very clear sense of direction offered by senior leaders and keen to benefit from the increased training they have to improve their professional practice. Responses to the pre-inspection questionnaire show that a significant number of parents and carers are rightly concerned about aspects of the school's work, including pupils' progress, the quality of teaching and behaviour in some lessons. Although communication with parents has

improved with the publication of a weekly newsletter, the school has not sought their views often enough.

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Annex A

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?	4
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	No
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	4
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	4
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	3
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3
How well learners enjoy their education	3
The attendance of learners	2
The behaviour of learners	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	3

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	4
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	4
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?	Yes

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

13 December 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Woodland Middle School, Flitwick MK45 1NP

On behalf of all the inspectors, I should like to thank you for all the help you gave us during the inspection.

During our visit, you told us how much you appreciate the school's very good facilities, particularly for art, design and technology, ICT, PE and science. Most of you enjoy school and all of you mentioned your enthusiasm for the extra-curricular programme and the range of visits, themed days and special events there are. You also told us about the confidence you have in your form teachers to deal with any problems. We agree that these are strengths of the school. You are well aware of how to keep healthy and safe and, in the lessons we observed, you impressed us by the positive way in which you worked together. We were also very impressed by your confidence in speaking to us and in taking on responsibilities around the school, such as helping with the library or the school council.

We recognise that your school does some things well but, in some important areas, there are weaknesses. The school has experienced some difficulties caused by staff changes or absences; for example, there have been three headteachers and one acting headteacher in quite a short time. This has affected the education it provides for you. We think that you should be achieving more in English, particularly in your writing, and that your teachers should always make sure that you know what you are learning, how well you are doing and what you need to do to improve. We want them to plan work that links more closely to your needs and to try to make all of your lessons as interesting as the best ones we saw. We have also asked the headteacher to check the curriculum more carefully to make sure that you all achieve as well as you can.

During our visit, we thought your behaviour was good. However, we know, because you, your parents and the staff told us, that some lessons are disrupted by a minority of pupils and time is wasted. We would like all of you to be respectful of each other and, if you do this, everyone will learn more - this is vitally important for your future success. Lastly, we think that the new headteacher and senior team have made a good start and are doing the right things to make Woodland Middle a better school.

We are sure that the staff will do their best to improve the school but we think that it needs some extra help. For this reason, inspectors will visit the school to check the progress you are making. We wish you all a great deal of success.

Yours sincerely

Rhona Seviour

Her Majesty's Inspector