

Astbury St Mary's CofE Primary School

Inspection report

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| Unique Reference Number | 111333 |
| Local Authority | Cheshire |
| Inspection number | 310567 |
| Inspection date | 11 December 2007 |
| Reporting inspector | Margot D'Arcy |

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

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| Type of school | Primary |
| School category | Voluntary aided |
| Age range of pupils | 4-11 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number on roll | |
| School | 123 |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body |
| Chair | Mr Tony McCormick |
| Headteacher | Mrs Jenny Wagstaffe |
| Date of previous school inspection | 1 December 2003 |
| School address | School Lane Astbury Congleton Cheshire CW12 4RG |
| Telephone number | 01260 272528 |
| Fax number | 01260 298160 |

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|--------------------------|------------------|
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: standards and achievement, the quality of teaching and learning, and leadership and management. Evidence was gathered from the school's own self-evaluation; national published assessment data and the school's own assessment records; school documents and minutes; observation of the school at work; discussions with staff, pupils, parents, governors and local authority representatives; parents' questionnaires and local authority monitoring reports. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail.

Description of the school

The school has fewer pupils than most primary schools. It is situated in the small village of Astbury, near Congleton. Most pupils are of White British heritage. A very small number are from minority ethnic groups, but all are fluent speakers of English. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with statements of special educational need, is below average. The proportion taking free school meals is well below average. On entry to the Reception class, children's standards are generally above those typical of four year olds. The school has achieved the Activemark Award.

Since the last inspection, there has been significant instability in staffing, including at leadership and management level. There have been three headteachers, three acting headteachers and extended periods of staff absence, including senior managers. The current headteacher, appointed at Easter 2006, completed two terms at the school before a period of two terms maternity leave. She returned to the school on an almost full-time basis this term.

The staffing disruption that has occurred since the last inspection is acknowledged to have had a negative impact on the school's work and pupils' standards and achievement. Many parents expressed concern about the staffing changes. Governors and the local authority were also concerned about the impact on the school's effectiveness and this resulted in the school receiving intensive support from the local authority from January 2006 until June 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

There are a number of strengths in the school's provision, but many of these reflect recent improvements that have not had time to impact fully on pupils' standards and achievement. Consequently, although the school's overall effectiveness is improving, it is not yet good as the school evaluates. Overall standards by the end of Year 6 are significantly above average. However, pupils' achievement is only satisfactory because progress has been inconsistent due to the disruption that has occurred in recent years. The local authority has provided extremely good support for the school, including working with governors to make an excellent appointment to the post of headteacher. The headteacher has, during her relatively short tenure, tackled some very difficult staffing situations exceptionally well. She has also made very good decisions in the appointment of new staff. This has resulted in a significant improvement in the quality of teaching, which is now good. The improvement has, however, been comparatively recent. Consequently, whilst learning in lessons is currently good, it is too soon to see the impact of improved teaching on helping pupils, who have not achieved as well as they should in the past, make up lost ground.

Children get off to a fine start in the Foundation Stage where they make good progress in all areas. In Years 1 to 6, progress has been inconsistent. The focus on improving pupils' skills in mathematical problem solving and scientific investigation is beginning to impact on learning. Progress in writing, however, remains an issue and is not as good as it should be. This is reflected in the school's own data and in Year 6 test results in English, which show marked fluctuation in pupils' achievement over the last four years. The school has prioritised the need to improve standards and achievement in writing. Systems to enable the school to closely monitor pupils' progress and evaluate the impact of teaching have recently been introduced. These have potential to identify underachievement so intervention can be quick to ensure pupils move on at the rate of which they are capable. The systems are in their infancy, however, and are not yet comprehensive enough to track the progress of groups and help in setting challenging targets across the school.

The headteacher has worked effectively with the assistant headteacher in implementing many new initiatives to promote school improvement. Parents, despite being concerned by staffing disruptions, have remained loyal to the school and are now happy with what it is providing for their children. Many spoke positively about the changes that have occurred since the current headteacher was appointed. 'The headteacher has made a fantastic impact', and, 'the school is the best it has been for a long time', were typical comments. Pupils, too, have lots of good things to say about the school. The first thing all mention is how much they get on with their teachers and enjoy the interesting work they provide for them. Typical strengths in teaching include detailed planning, questioning and organisation of work to meet pupils' different needs. Most lessons move along at a good pace and involve pupils well, for example, in explaining strategies to solve mathematical problems or discussing preferences for particular authors. Support staff are used effectively and on the whole, good use is made of information and communication technology (ICT) to support teaching and learning.

The curriculum makes a good contribution to pupils' academic and personal development. It provides opportunities for them to develop key skills and make links between learning in different subjects. In design technology and science, for instance, pupils use numeracy skills to construct design plans and record the results of investigations. Some pleasing artwork is developed within subjects such as history and geography, where pupils also learn about their

own and other cultures. Religious education gives pupils an insight into main world religions, though they are less aware of the implications of living in a culturally diverse society. A good range of visits, visitors, extra-curricular activities and links with local businesses and high schools enrich the curriculum, increase pupils' enjoyment and help prepare them for the future.

Behaviour is good and pupils have a sharp moral awareness. They accept responsibilities readily and talk about how they get involved in good causes to help people who are less fortunate than they are. Through the curriculum pupils have gained a comprehensive understanding of how to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Their knowledge and skills of how to keep safe is extremely well developed; older pupils show very good first-aid awareness in response to the training they have been given. A high standard of pastoral care, guidance and support is provided. Each pupil is known as an individual and made to feel an important member of the school's special family. There are rigorous procedures for safeguarding children, risk assessments and health and safety. Improvements to how the school guides pupils academically are occurring, but overall, this aspect is still at an early stage of development.

Collectively, input from the local authority, the dedication and drive of the headteacher and assistant headteacher, supported by governors, has set the school on the right track to recover from the decline that occurred after the last inspection. The number of new staff means that leadership and management roles of subject and other coordinators are at an early stage of development. However, there is now a shared vision, renewed enthusiasm and energy to move forward. Together with new initiatives and improvements to teaching, these promising improvements led the school to view aspects of its work more positively than is currently the case. Overall, however, the school knows its strengths and weaknesses and recognises that the improvements made to provision and leadership and management have not yet had time to embed and impact fully on pupils' academic achievement.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

The children make good progress in all areas of the curriculum. By the time they are ready to begin Year 1 the vast majority attain the expected learning goals and many are working well beyond this level. Teaching and learning are good. The teacher has a secure understanding of how young children learn and provides plenty of opportunities for them to investigate and explore using all their senses. There are well-structured play activities indoors and out. Support staff make a valuable contribution, especially in ensuring that quality learning experiences continue in the exciting and much improved outdoor area. The children are well cared for. Regular assessments chart their development and guide planning to take their learning forward at a good pace.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and improve pupils' achievement in writing.
- Refine assessment and tracking systems to provide a clear picture of progress of individuals and groups, and support the setting of challenging targets across the school.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

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| 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

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

Achievement and standards

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| How well do learners achieve? | 3 |
| The standards ¹ reached by learners | 2 |
| 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

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|---|---|
| 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 extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles | 2 |
| The extent to which learners adopt safe practices | 1 |
| How well learners enjoy their education | 2 |
| The attendance of learners | 2 |
| The behaviour of learners | 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

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| 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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

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| 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 | 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 | 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 |

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

Inspection of Astbury St Mary's Church of England Primary School, Astbury, Congleton, Cheshire, CW9 4RG

Thank you for being so helpful and polite when we came to visit your school. We enjoyed talking to you and it was truly heart-warming to hear your lovely singing in the nativity concert. Over the last few years there have been a lot of changes at your school, some of which slowed its progress. We judged your school to be satisfactory, but the good news is that things are improving. This is due mainly to the very hard work of your headteacher, the staff and governors. What is really pleasing is that through all of this change, your standards of behaviour, attitudes to school and willingness to take on responsibilities and help each other have remained good; this is really commendable. Many of the improvements that have happened at your school are quite new. So, although you reach higher than average standards by the end of Year 6, we know that many of you can do even better, especially in writing. We have asked your school to concentrate on this and were pleased to note that they already had plans to do so. You can help by making that extra bit of effort with your writing so that you really excel in this.

The youngest children in Reception do well and the good start they get here ensures that they learn to enjoy school. You told us how much you liked your teachers and enjoyed the interesting lessons and activities they plan for you. We agree with your views that the teaching and learning experiences are good. We really enjoyed our visits to your lessons and looking at the beautiful displays of your art and other work. The moving prayers you had written for people you care about at home and around the world, and your ideas about gifts to the world at Christmas showed how well you are helped to think about the needs of others. Your school takes good care of you and ensures you learn how to be healthy and keep safe. We could see that you are being helped to be more involved in your own learning and that your school has begun to keep a closer eye on how well each of you is doing. We have asked that they push ahead with their plans to monitor your progress even more closely so that they can quickly provide you with extra help or more challenging work if you are not doing as well as you might.