

Commonswood School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117378
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	312593
Inspection dates	11–12 December 2008
Reporting inspector	Glynis Bradley-Peat

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

The registered childcare, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Type of school	Primary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	407
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	0
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Joan Rivers
Headteacher	Mr Ricci Achillini
Date of previous school inspection	14 June 2004
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	The Commons Welwyn Garden City Hertfordshire AL7 4RU
Telephone number	01707880420
Fax number	01707 880422

Age group	3–11
Inspection dates	11–12 December 2008
Inspection number	312593

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

The inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The school is larger than most primary schools. There is provision for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for children from three to five years of age. There is on-site provision for a breakfast club and an after school club but this is not managed by the governing body. The majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds and the percentage who speak English as an additional language is low. The proportion of pupils with moderate learning, speech and language, and behavioural and emotional difficulties is above average with concentrations in particular year groups. The proportion known to qualify for free school meals is below average. Following a period of instability, staffing is now more settled. Attainment on entry to the school is just below average.

The school has gained the Basic Skills, Arts Mark Silver and ActiveMark awards.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Commonswood School provides a good and rapidly improving education for its pupils. Some areas of its work are outstanding. Excellent care, guidance and support contribute to the pupils' outstanding personal development and well-being. A highly creative curriculum combined with exceptional teaching is accelerating the rate of school improvement and the progress that pupils make. Standards since the last inspection have risen to above average at both key stages because of good leadership and management. The excellent leadership skills of the headteacher, supported well by senior and middle leaders, ensure clear direction for improvement. New leaders are being supported well. Governance, although in the main supportive and effective, does not always ensure that it rigorously reviews school policies and practices.

The school has recruited several new teachers and coached all staff leading to outstanding teaching becoming a key factor in the accelerating rates of progress identified in the school's pupil assessment data. This high quality teaching is making up for some underachievement in previous years. Teaching and learning are excellent currently although they have not yet translated into higher national test results in English, mathematics and science at the end of Year 6. Pupils are on course to reach higher standards in 2009. High standards are clearly evident in several other areas of the curriculum, for example in art, information and communication technology (ICT) and design and technology. Progress in many lessons observed during the inspection was outstanding overall. However, the school's own self-evaluation process has rightly identified that writing, especially in Key Stage 2, is still a key area for further improvement.

Parents acknowledge how well their children are performing in school. Typical of their comments are, 'I have always been pleased with the progress my sons have made,' and, 'We believe the teachers and staff definitely have the children's best interests at heart'. Parents also praise the school for the way it involves them directly in their children's learning, such as through 'synthetic phonics' and handwriting workshops. The school has worked hard to develop extremely effective links not only with parents, but with the local and wider community. There are links with local secondary schools and businesses, and the school has developed an international link with a school in France. This ensures that pupils learn to appreciate difference and diversity. The school has an excellent strategy for promoting and evaluating the success of pupils' contributions to community cohesion.

The school believes strongly in developing the whole child. The pupils' personal development is excellent because teachers provide them with opportunities to develop many personal skills. Excellent personal, social and health education ensures pupils' emotional well-being is also promoted very well and that pupils have an excellent understanding of the importance of exercise, eating healthily and staying safe. Enrichment of the curriculum is excellent and has a major impact on pupils' personal development. The range of visitors and visits brings real meaning to lessons and pupils enjoy practical approaches to work.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

The overall effectiveness of the EYFS is good. Children enjoy an exciting curriculum, which allows them to explore and investigate for themselves and make very good use of the outdoor classrooms. There is a good balance between activities led by the teacher and those developed

by the children themselves. Children enter the setting with skills below those expected for their age. They make good progress so that when they enter Year 1, most are working securely within the early learning goals; a few have exceeded them. This represents a good level of achievement. They achieve particularly well in communication, language and literacy, because of the recent rigorous approach to phonics, which is paying dividends in their reading and writing skills. The children's personal development and well-being are outstanding. They work well together and celebrate each other's achievements, such as when two boys working on computers with the same programme were finding different results. 'I've found it!' was eventually heard from one. 'Well done!' came the reply from the other, with a pat on the back for the first. Leadership and management are effective; the recently appointed EYFS leader has an excellent knowledge of child development and, with a strong team, has put in place good strategies to raise achievement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Build upon the strategies already initiated to improve writing in order to raise standards further in English.
- Ensure that governors have a more rigorous programme of policy review.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Pupils, including those who need extra support with their learning and language, make good progress between entering the school and leaving in Year 6. In Year 2, pupils achieve above average standards in reading and mathematics and make good progress. Standards in writing are significantly above those attained nationally. Overall standards in Year 6 are rising. The 2008 provisional test results and teacher assessments indicate above average standards. Inspection evidence shows that standards in the current Year 6 are already above average in English, mathematics and science; progress towards their challenging targets is excellent.

A key area for development has been to improve writing throughout the school. There has been a good impact in Years 1 and 2. In Key Stage 2, it is clear to see from current teacher assessments that improvement in Year 6 this term is excellent and the standard of writing has leapt. This is because of excellent teaching which has successfully focused on speaking and listening and new phonic work. Intense work is now beginning in other year groups.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The pupils' personal development and well-being are outstanding and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. They grow in self-awareness and self-confidence, and appreciate their own and others' cultures by visiting museums and theatres, and celebrating festivals from a range of faiths. Pupils are kind and polite to each other and know right from wrong. Their behaviour is excellent because so many pupils have developed strong self-discipline. Pupils enjoy attending school because they recognise that what they learn will prepare them well for later life. Attendance is above average. Pupils understand very well what it means to lead a healthy lifestyle and spoke enthusiastically about the benefits of all the various sports they participate in including cricket, lacrosse and rugby. They enjoy having an influence on their school through such responsibilities as the school council. They support the system of playground buddies, helping those who might occasionally feel lonely to join in with others' games. They support each other in lessons and particularly enjoy working in groups and pairs

on practical work. As a result of their excellent personal qualities and good basic skills in English and mathematics, they are well prepared for the next stage in their education.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Outstanding teaching and a wide range of stimulating learning experiences contribute to the pupils' good and improving progress. The focus on improving the pupils' writing skills is ensuring that more now produce high quality pieces of writing. The current theme of 'Winter' has prompted some excellent poems accompanied by superb examples of drawing and painting. Teachers and teaching assistants plan highly stimulating lessons. These provide many opportunities for pupils to work independently, in pairs and groups, such as when designing and making electrically powered moving vehicles in science. Teachers always ensure that pupils are engaged in their work through well timed, focused questions and praise and encouragement. Teachers are highly skilled at tracking pupils' progress so that they are able to build rapidly on what pupils already know and can do through the setting of challenging targets. One took the opportunity to display a piece of work and then invite discussion which identified the good aspects and sought ways to improve it further. This was modeled highly effectively through the innovative use of technology.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The school provides an exceptional curriculum, which supports fully all aspects of the pupils' learning and personal development. It builds very well on their prior knowledge in literacy, numeracy, science and ICT and contributes very effectively to the development of pupils' high standards of social and emotional maturity. A great strength of the curriculum is the way it links subjects together so that pupils enjoy their learning. This is evident in the excellent quality of work on display around the school. Pupils are provided with many opportunities to visit places of interest which brings their learning to life. They particularly enjoy the residential visit to an adventure centre where they are able to work cooperatively in teams. Pupils experience themed weeks, for example in design and technology, and they perform extremely well in end of term concerts. Pupils are successfully encouraged to develop their specific talents and interests.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Care, guidance and support are excellent. Pupils are very happy. In discussion, they made the comment, 'Teachers look after us very well. They are very supportive.' They confirmed that they have an adult to talk to if they have a problem and feel safe in school. They know that any inappropriate behaviour will be dealt with by staff swiftly and constructively. Teachers know pupils exceptionally well and guide them very effectively through their comments for improvement in marking and in setting challenging learning targets. Pupils say they find these helpful. The monitoring of pupils' progress is thorough and comprehensive, so that those who need focused support with their learning are identified. Very well developed partnerships with external agencies benefit pupils' learning and attitudes. Risk assessments and child protection arrangements are in place and staff are consistent in adhering to health and safety procedures.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher, leadership team and subject leaders keep a close watch on teaching and learning and give useful feedback to teachers to help them improve. Staff work together closely and effectively as a team so that expertise is shared well across the school. They ensure that practice improves through a 'coaching' approach which has paid real dividends in improving the quality of teaching. Governors take a close interest in what happens in school and ask the leadership what it is doing and why. However, they sometimes rely too readily on the information given to them by the school. They do not ensure that policies are systematically reviewed in a timely fashion.

This is a school that knows itself very well. It has identified areas for development and is working diligently and systematically towards improving achievement in writing. Based on improvements made since the time of the last inspection and the highly effective leadership and management of the headteacher, the school has a good capacity to improve further.

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

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
---	----------------

Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2
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?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	2
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	2
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	1
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	1
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ 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/or disabilities make progress	2

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	2
The behaviour of learners	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1
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

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

15 December 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Commonswood School, Welwyn Garden City, AL7 4RU

It was good to meet so many of you and to listen to what you had to say about your school. Special thanks go to those of you who took time to meet with one of the inspectors. This letter is to give you an idea of what is in my full report. Here are some of the positive features of your school.

- You make a very good start to your schooling in the Nursery.
- You make good progress with your work in Years 1 to 6 and leave the school with above average standards in English, mathematics and science.
- You enjoy school very much because teachers and other adults care for you extremely well and help you to learn.
- You have an excellent knowledge of how to keep healthy. You told us about what you like to eat and the sports you like to play.
- You work hard, behave extremely well and find the excellent curriculum very interesting.
- We really appreciated your beautiful art work and enjoyed reading your much improved writing. The poems were particularly good about winter.
- The school council is working really well and you have many good ideas for improving your school.

Even in a good school like yours, there are things which could be improved.

- Although your writing has really improved it could be even better so that you are able to gain higher levels in your tests in Years 2 and 6 in English.
- The governors in your school do a good job but they are going to check and review school policies and practices more closely.

I hope that you will all keep on working hard and enjoying school. I wish you all the best.

Yours sincerely

Glynis Bradley-Peat

Lead inspector