

Balfour Junior School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118328
Local Authority	Medway
Inspection number	312890
Inspection dates	1–2 May 2008
Reporting inspector	Selwyn Ward

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

Type of school	Junior
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	7–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	464
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Sharon Hughes
Headteacher	Brenda Wood
Date of previous school inspection	27 November 2004
School address	Balfour Road Chatham ME4 6QX
Telephone number	01634 843833
Fax number	01634 301070

Age group	7–11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

In this large school, an above average proportion of pupils have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, mostly for moderate learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural development, and speech and communication needs. The number of pupils at an early stage of learning English as an additional language is average.

At the time of the inspection, the headteacher had been on long-term sick leave since November 2007. There has been continued uncertainty over the date of his return. The deputy headteacher was appointed as acting headteacher in February 2008. The school has had to place an increased reliance on temporary teaching staff to cover the classes of other members of the leadership team who have taken on additional management roles for a temporary but still indeterminate period.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Balfour Junior School provides a satisfactory education for its pupils. The prolonged absence of the headteacher has alarmed many parents and it has inevitably taken a toll within the school. Although the other school leaders cope well with day-to-day management, the uncertainty over the date of the headteacher's return has made it difficult for them to make strategic or long-term plans. Governors are very committed to the school and have been exceptionally proactive. This means, however, that they have sometimes sought to involve themselves too much in the everyday management of the school. There is some friction in relationships between the governing body and leadership team which the local authority is helping to resolve.

Parents voice mixed views about the school. Many express strong praise for the education their children receive but a significant minority complain that the school is 'not as good as it once was'. In fact, the school is performing similarly to the time of the last inspection. Standards are broadly average and this represents satisfactory achievement. Nonetheless, some pupils are capable of doing better. The recent move to linking different subjects together through themes and topics is helping to make lessons interesting and results in pupils who are attentive and engaged in learning. Pupils enjoy, for example, the increased opportunities they now have to apply their literacy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills in other subjects. Teachers get on well with their pupils. They manage their classes well and give pupils clear instructions and explanations. They do not always set out as clearly, however, what it is that the pupils are expected to learn; sometimes, what are shown on the board as 'learning objectives' are really only the tasks that the pupils are due to carry out. Too often, work is not matched closely enough to the different capabilities of the pupils, so that it is too easy for some and too difficult for others. This limits pupils' progress in lessons as, even in those subjects where pupils are organised into ability sets, the range of abilities in each group is quite wide. Progress in some classes is currently being slowed by the disruptive effect of pupils having a succession of different temporary teachers, for example to cover for staff taking on temporary management roles.

A notable strength of the school is in the pupils' good personal development. Pupils behave well and they mix and get on well together. They have plenty of opportunities to take on responsibilities, and those, for example, on the school council take their roles very seriously, although some express disappointment that their ideas and suggestions are not always followed up. Pupils grow in confidence during their time in school. Several parents comment about this and on the contribution made to boosting confidence by the widespread participation in sports and performance in musical productions. Pupils in the main feel safe because they are generally well looked after. They each have individual targets that are helping them to improve their work, but the guidance they get through marking is varied. 'Well done' comments and house points offer encouragement to pupils but do not give them sufficient practical guidance on how to move their work on.

The acting leadership team has an accurate picture of the school and of where improvements are needed. School leaders regularly monitor teaching and pupils' progress, although often there is a mismatch in their lesson observations between the grade given for the lessons and the progress that the pupils are judged to have made. Despite the present difficulties and the limitations these impose, the school demonstrates satisfactory capacity to improve.

What the school should do to improve further

- Better match work in lessons to pupils' different capabilities and give all pupils a clear indication in lessons of what they are expected to learn.
- Ensure that all marking gives pupils guidance on what they need to do to improve their work.
- Draw on the experience and advice of the local authority to review the division of responsibilities of governors and school leaders to ensure a more harmonious working relationship.

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.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Standards are average and this represents broadly satisfactory achievement in relation to pupils' starting points, which are a little above average. In 2007, pupils made less progress than they should. Their progress suffered as a result of several changes of teacher. Pupils in the current Years 3 to 6 have benefited from improved induction arrangements to help them better settle into junior school and from closer liaison with their feeder infant schools. Pupils with moderate learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural, and speech and communication needs make similar progress to their peers, as do those pupils at an early stage of learning English as an additional language. This is because they benefit from extra help in lessons, even when work is not always closely enough matched to their needs. More able pupils do not all make as much progress as they could because their work is not always challenging enough.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils care about their work and realise that hard work will produce rewards in both their next school and a future career. Pupils' attitudes and behaviour are always good and sometimes outstanding. Teaching is seldom disrupted even when some pupils have behavioural difficulties. Pupils respond well to the school's expectations to take responsibility for their own behaviour and independent learning. Most pupils say that they feel safe at school as bullying and racist incidents are now perceived as rare. Relationships across the school are supportive and greatly add to pupils' enjoyment of work and activities.

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural education of pupils is good. They relish their opportunities to take responsibility which help them grow in confidence. Cultural awareness has widened through the greater emphasis given to learning through topics, and pupils from different ethnic backgrounds respect and get on well with each other. Pupils are keen to participate in sport and regular physical exercise and appreciate the importance of a healthy diet. The school's determined efforts have helped to keep attendance well above the national average.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Positive relationships between staff and pupils ensure that pupils respond well to teaching and undertake activities with enthusiasm. Teachers make good use of resources, for example, to

enable pupils to research topics using laptop computers. Behaviour is managed well. Teachers routinely set out 'learning objectives' for each lesson, but sometimes these simply show what the pupils are expected to do rather than what they should expect to learn. Too often, all pupils in the class are given similar work to do, with too little regard for their different capabilities. This is less of a problem for pupils with additional learning needs because these pupils are often well supported by teaching assistants. It is the more able who are most affected because they make less progress than they could when they are set work that is not challenging enough.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is carefully planned to ensure pupils' access to a wide range of interesting activities. The move to teaching through topics that link different subjects together is helping to enliven pupils' learning and contributes to their good personal development, although its introduction is too recent to show demonstrable improvements in standards. Pupils greatly enjoy their many visits which make good use of local Medway facilities. They also enjoy the good range of clubs on offer, covering an impressive range of sports as well as other activities. Around a quarter of the pupils have joined the school choir. Balfour Junior is well resourced and the attractive displays help to create a stimulating learning environment.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

The school complies with statutory guidelines for checking staff's backgrounds and ensuring the safety and well-being of pupils. Most pupils are confident they can approach staff to express any worries or concerns. Constructive links with external agencies ensure that pupils with additional needs have access to specialist support. The quality of academic guidance, however, is inconsistent. Pupils have individual targets and they refer to them. Teachers' marking, however, does not generally give pupils clear enough guidance on what they need to do to move to the next stage in their learning. School leaders have identified this in their monitoring and are in the process of drawing up a new marking policy.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The acting headteacher and senior leaders have held the school together through an uncertain period. They are dedicated and committed professionals who have risen to the challenge. Day-to-day routines have run well, and they have managed and motivated staff to go the extra mile. The school's focus on school targets and priorities has been maintained. However, despite their sustained efforts, the transitory nature of current leadership arrangements has meant less focus on strategic planning for the school's long-term future. The school development plan projects ahead for the next three years, but it does not set sufficiently measurable success criteria.

The acting leadership team continues to empower staff and delegate responsibility across the management structure. Most subjects are covered by coordinators, but many are new in post. They do not all feel that they have sufficient time to supervise their subjects. Teachers are well used to being observed in their classroom practice. Lesson observation sheets are rigorous in detailing areas for improvement but they do not make sufficient connection between their

assessment of the quality of teaching and the progress pupils are making. The governing body has emerged from a period of reorganisation and, at the time of the inspection, a quarter of the places were unfilled. Governors are enthusiastic and keen to make an impact on the life of the school. They take an unusually detailed involvement at an operational level and this has contributed to a sometimes inharmonious relationship between some governors and staff. This is becoming an increasing distraction for both school leaders and governors which could threaten the effectiveness of the school if it is not sensitively and amicably resolved.

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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?	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 capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

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?	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	3
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	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?	2
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	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

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Balfour Junior School, Chatham, ME4 6QX

Thank you for making us so welcome when we came to visit your school. Balfour is giving you a satisfactory education, so that you make reasonable progress and the standard of work is average. Some of you could be doing better, which is why we have asked staff to better match work to your different abilities. When you all do the same work in class, it can mean the lesson is too easy for some of you and too difficult for others. We could see that teachers regularly write the 'learning objectives' on the board, but sometimes these are really just the activities for the lesson rather than what you are due to learn. Again, we have asked staff to look at this, so you all have a clear picture of what you are expected to learn.

We were pleased to see how well behaved you are and how well you get on with each other. It all helps to make Balfour Junior a friendly place where most of you feel safe. We were delighted to see how good your attendance is. The school looks after you well and it is good to see that so many of you know and make use of your individual targets. We would like, though, to see marking also give you good, clear guidance on what you need to do to improve your work. You can help too by asking teachers how you can make your work even better.

Some of you told us what a difference the new topics are making to your lessons. They are certainly making learning more fun. You obviously enjoy the good range of sports and other clubs on offer, and the numbers that take part in the choir and in other musical productions are impressive.

Many of your parents expressed worries to us about the uncertainties over the time the headteacher has been unwell. Other leadership staff have managed well over the last few months, although it has been particularly difficult for them to plan ahead because they have never known with certainty how long it will be before the headteacher returns. Leadership staff and governors have not been getting on well and we were concerned that this could give rise to problems in the future if it is not quickly sorted out. We have asked them to make use of the support available from the local authority to help get things running smoothly again by making sure that governors and staff all have a clear understanding of who should be doing what.

Best wishes Selwyn Ward Lead inspector