

Stowmarket Middle School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124821
Local Authority	SUFFOLK LA
Inspection number	315073
Inspection dates	4–5 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Kevin Corrigan

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	531
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Lesley Mayes
Headteacher	Mrs Sally Holmes
Date of previous school inspection	26 April 2004
School address	Walnut Tree Walk Stowmarket Suffolk IP14 1JP
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Age group	9–13
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Stowmarket Middle School is a larger than average school. The great majority of pupils are of White British background and are drawn from both the town and local rural areas with over a quarter living outside the school's catchment area. Pupils come from mixed social and economic backgrounds. The percentage of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average. Attainment on entry to Year 5 is broadly average with a declining number of higher attaining pupils in recent years. The school has achieved Healthy School Status, the Financial Management Standard in Schools and has the Basic Skills Award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school which provides a caring and supportive environment. Pupils do well both in their academic progress and in their personal development and they reach standards which are above average. Pupils enjoy coming to school and the vast majority work productively and cooperatively in lessons and, as a consequence, they achieve well.

Pupils attain broadly average standards by the end of Year 6 and above average standards by the end of Year 8. This good overall progress and achievement is a consequence of the good teaching the pupils receive and the careful monitoring of their individual progress by subject leaders. Underachieving pupils are identified and appropriate support strategies put in place for them. The condensing of the Key Stage 3 curriculum in Years 7 and 8 from three to two years, and the consequent setting of more challenging targets for pupils, are significantly improving their learning, particularly in mathematics.

Pupils who find learning difficult are very well supported. As a consequence, these pupils also make good progress. Whilst most pupils progress well, some more able pupils have not made as much progress as expected in mathematics, science and English by the end of Year 6 and in science by the end of Year 8.

Teaching and learning are good. Most lessons are stimulating and engage pupils in learning. While there is some very good practice in encouraging pupils' independence, it is not consistent in all lessons and is a key area that the school is working to develop further. Where pupils are not involved enough in learning for themselves, they lose concentration and interest. Pupils behave well in lessons and respond enthusiastically to the content and range of activities offered. Some parents have expressed concerns about the poor behaviour of a few pupils, particularly in Year 7, who disrupt learning. The school has taken swift action to deal with this and successful strategies are in place.

The headteacher provides a clear vision for improving the school and has evaluated its strengths and areas for improvement accurately. The delegation of leadership responsibilities has had a significant impact on the work of the school, strengthening accountability as well as providing appropriate opportunities for training. This has also led to more stable staffing. The school's work with its partner institutions is outstanding. It liaises particularly effectively with its feeder schools and the high schools to provide extremely smooth transition arrangements and a high level of consistency of subject content and learning across the curriculum.

The curriculum is good. The wide range of subjects offered to pupils is enhanced by an extensive range of extra-curricular activities and clubs and these are enthusiastically taken up by boys and girls. The vast majority of pupils are polite, sociable and are developing as responsible citizens. Their knowledge of healthy lifestyles and feelings of being safe in school are good. They contribute much to the school and the wider community.

The school has effectively tackled the areas to improve as identified at the time of the last inspection and has good capacity to improve further. The school provides good value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards that the more able pupils attain in English, mathematics and science by the end of Year 6 and in science by the end of Year 8
- Extend pupils' independence in learning and in assessing their progress consistently across the school by building on the very good practice that exists.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Pupils achieve well and by Year 8 attain standards that are above national expectations. A combination of good teaching, challenging targets and close monitoring of pupils' performance ensures that they make good progress. There is some underachievement by the more able pupils in Year 6 in English, mathematics and science and in Year 8 in science. However, they reach significantly higher standards in mathematics than that expected in Year 8. Pupils who find learning difficult are very well supported with their studies and in their personal development and, as a consequence, they achieve well.

Pupils' progress in Years 5 and 6 is not as marked as that in Years 7 and 8. This is because too few pupils in Year 6 reach the higher level (Level 5) in English, mathematics and science. Pupils' weak scientific enquiry skills has also been identified as a contributory factor to lower results in science and this aspect of the subject is now being tackled robustly. The move to a condensed curriculum for pupils in Years 7 and 8, is providing challenging targets for them which they are successfully meeting.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is good. Pupils are enthusiastic about school and their attendance is above average. The vast majority behave well and are polite, helpful and friendly. They are keen to do well and work hard in lessons. The very small number of pupils who find good behaviour difficult at times are managed well.

Pupils understand how to lead healthy lives. A large number participate in sporting activities and the gym club before school is very well attended. Pupils make healthy food choices and demonstrate a secure understanding of health and safety issues. They willingly take on responsibilities. Year 8 pupils volunteer to train to help younger pupils with their reading and as 'Peer Supporters'. Their role is effective and pupils say they value the support. Pupils are generally cooperative and work well together. They say bullying is rare and dealt with quickly and effectively if it happens. School council members take their responsibilities seriously and say the school listens to and acts upon their suggestions. Pupils show caring attitudes and support the wider community through their charity fund-raising and whole school productions, such as 'Joseph'. Confidence, self-esteem and teamwork develop well as a result of sports, music, drama and residential visits. The standards achieved, combined with co-operative attitudes, prepare pupils well for the next stage of their education.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good. Most lessons are stimulating and engage pupils in learning at first hand through well chosen activities. Lessons capture pupils' interest and they often become engrossed in their learning. For example, Year 7 pupils were inspired to write their own poetry on a theme of Viking warriors following some excellent teaching and Year 8 solved clues to a murder mystery in their mathematics. Through such experiences, pupils have good attitudes, behave well in lessons and are keen to learn. Teaching in Years 7 and 8 is more consistently

good or better, particularly in English and mathematics. However, the teaching of scientific enquiry skills is underdeveloped but is improving. In many lessons, pupils are given tasks and activities that enable them to work collaboratively and independently. Good support is provided to those who find learning more difficult. Pupils respond very well in such environments, for example, they are learning to review and assess their own work. Pupils generally know how well they are doing because effective marking provides feedback and guidance to them on what they need to do to improve. The school is working to extend opportunities for more independence in learning further, particularly in Years 5 and 6. There is some excellent practice on which it can build in this respect, but such skills are not consistent across the school. Where teaching is weaker, whole class teaching extends for too long, pupils are not involved enough in learning for themselves and they lose concentration and interest.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is stimulating, challenging and meets pupils' needs and interests well. Good provision is made for developing basic skills, including collaborative work, particularly in English and mathematics. Much has been done since the last inspection to improve provision for information and communication technology (ICT) through investment in resources and training; pupils now use computers effectively to help them learn. A very strong and distinctive feature is the condensed Key Stage 3 programme which is successfully enabling pupils to cover programmes of work for Years 7 to 9 in reduced time. Pupils enjoy the challenge of building on their knowledge and skills, especially in mathematics, although their scientific enquiry skills are not developed so well. The school makes very good use of the local and wider community to enrich pupils' experiences and promote their self-esteem, for example through the many residential experiences provided. Pupils' personal, social and health education is a strength that contributes much to their good understanding of living healthy and fit lives. A very good range of additional activities and clubs are well attended and contribute much to pupils' cultural development and enjoyment.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school provides a caring and supportive learning environment. Very effective transition procedures ensure Year 5 pupils quickly settle into the school and that Year 8 pupils are confident about transfer. The care taken to support vulnerable pupils on transfer to and from the school is outstanding. Arrangements for safeguarding pupils are secure. Very good support for pupils who find learning difficult enables them to make good progress. Individual education plans are well written and regularly reviewed. Teachers and teaching assistants are very supportive and pupils and parents appreciate their help. Vulnerable pupils receive excellent guidance and support.

Pupils say they feel safe and know who to turn to if they need help. In the first instance, many look to the Year 8 'Peer Supporters' and these provide good advice and support. Good systems for monitoring academic progress are in place although some aspects are not yet fully developed, particularly for identifying and supporting the more able pupils. Pupils' work is generally marked frequently and tells them what they have done well and how to improve. Pupils know their learning targets and how well they are doing. Pupils enjoy assessing theirs' and others' work when given the opportunity.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher provides a clear vision for the school, ensuring that pupils are both nurtured and challenged to make the best of their abilities. The school's self-evaluation is good and the headteacher knows the school's strengths and areas for improvement. The decision to distribute areas of responsibility more widely among senior staff has provided opportunities for developing their professional expertise and has contributed to stability in staffing. The headteacher, working with heads of department, monitors teaching and learning in a structured and positive way. He ensures that good practice is shared and that support is provided in areas where teaching is less effective. Heads of department are now making more strategic use of data to analyse patterns and monitor pupils' progress. Heads of year are also starting to use this data to monitor pupils' progress across their subjects. Following a dip in national test results for pupils in Year 6 in 2007, particularly in science, the school responded well. It identified the specific subject aspects to target for improvement. The school now provides a number of interesting activities to stretch those pupils identified as gifted and talented. Careful monitoring of pupils' performance and the adoption of a range of support strategies, including working with the local authority, have ensured that pupils make good progress towards their challenging targets. The governors know the school well and provide good support to the headteacher and the school, particularly for individual subject areas.

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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?	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

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 disabilities make progress	2

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	2
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

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

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	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2
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

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

6 March 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Stowmarket Middle School

I am writing to tell you about your school's inspection. First, I want to thank all of you, on behalf of the inspection team, for being so helpful during the inspection and answering our questions.

We think that Stowmarket School is a good school. It is well led by Mrs Holmes and her senior team and you are lucky to have teachers who work very hard to ensure you enjoy your time at school and succeed with your studies. Their commitment to your school work and your personal development is very clear. You do well at school because of the good teaching in most of your lessons and the way the teachers support you if they find that you are falling behind. Many of you reach levels in Year 8, when you leave, which you might expect to achieve in Year 9; well done!

The school provides well for those of you who find it difficult to learn or need support to behave well. We were impressed with your behaviour in lessons and how hard you worked, both as individuals and in groups, when teachers gave you interesting tasks. The school looks after you well, encouraging you to grow into responsible young citizens and to understand what it means to have a healthy lifestyle. You contribute well to the local community and adults from outside the school are impressed with how you speak to them.

We have a few suggestions to improve the school:

- improve the standards reached by those pupils who are expected to achieve the highest grades
- ensure that you are encouraged to work independently in all of your lessons.

I hope that your school will carry on the good work and wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely,

Kevin Corrigan

Lead Inspector