

Alumwell Junior School

Inspection report

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|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Unique Reference Number | 104142 |
| Local Authority | Walsall |
| Inspection number | 323976 |
| Inspection dates | 12–13 January 2009 |
| Reporting inspector | Ian Hodgkinson |

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

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| Type of school | Junior |
| School category | Community |
| Age range of pupils | 7–11 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number on roll | |
| School (total) | 351 |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body |
| Chair | Linda Jenkins |
| Headteacher | Max Vlahakis |
| Date of previous school inspection | 15 March 2006 |
| School address | Primley Avenue Walsall WS2 9UP |
| Telephone number | 01922 721391 |
| Fax number | 01922 721371 |

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

The inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This very large junior school is located in an area of residential housing on the western edge of Walsall, and the proportion of pupils entitled to a free school meal is nearly twice the national average. The school is oversubscribed in some year groups, and it attracts a small minority of pupils from beyond its immediate catchment area. Almost half the pupils are from minority ethnic groups, with around a quarter of Pakistani and a tenth of Indian heritage. A very high proportion of pupils – around a third – speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average, and the school provides support for pupils with a range of physical, behavioural, social and emotional needs. There is a much higher proportion of boys than girls in most year groups.

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: 2

Alumwell Junior is a good school. It has a number of outstanding features. Importantly, it benefits from excellent leadership and management, particularly at senior level. These have secured rising standards and a highly contented school community, with low staff turnover and much satisfaction from parents. 'I go to work happy in the knowledge that my little girl is well cared for', wrote one, reflecting the views of many. The school knows its strengths and weaknesses exceptionally well as a result of regularly monitoring its work and sharing the results of that monitoring openly and transparently. Members of the school community, including staff, governors, pupils and parents, are widely involved in the design and implementation of plans for improvement. Highly effective self-evaluation has contributed much to rising standards, and confirms that the school has an excellent capacity to improve. Leaders share an ambition to give pupils the best preparation for later life, although targets for improvement are not always used as sharply as they might as a means of raising still further academic performance. Teachers do not always make enough reference to pupils' individual targets in showing them how to improve, while in planning for school improvement, success criteria do not always identify sufficiently specific and measurable goals which reflect the school's high aspirations.

The school's success centres on its excellent work in lowering the barriers to educational achievement. It has built a community where all pupils, from whatever background, ethnic group or faith, feel really safe and valued and thoroughly enjoy school. The care, guidance and support offered by the school are outstanding, particularly the work done to liaise with parents in support of children's welfare and achievement. Parents greatly value the speed and effectiveness with which the school communicates with them when the need arises. Within this strong ethos of care and support, pupils' personal development and well-being are excellent. Their behaviour is exceptionally good and makes a significant contribution both to their good learning in class and to the excellent contribution they make to the school and wider community. They exercise leadership and team working skills with maturity and responsibility, and offer each other a great deal of mutual support.

Pupils are well taught and as a result make good progress. Girls do particularly well. Standards have risen in most subjects since the last inspection, and particularly so in science. Science was a key area for improvement in the last inspection, and the fact that nearly all pupils reached the nationally expected Level 4 in national tests in 2008 is an indication of how effective the school's improvement strategies are. Writing test results have, however, declined since the last inspection, and particularly those of boys. The school has taken successful action to secure improvements by strengthening the emphasis on writing and using more 'boy-friendly' resources and approaches in literacy lessons. Writing standards are now improving. However, there are insufficient opportunities for pupils to develop their skills by writing at length in other subjects of the curriculum. In most other respects, the school's curriculum is good. It makes a strong contribution, in part through a very well-designed programme of personal, social and health education, to pupils' excellent personal development.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards in writing, especially for boys, and broaden the opportunities given to pupils for writing at length in subjects across the curriculum.

- Ensure that targets and success criteria for school improvement clearly specify and quantify goals which reflect the school's high aspirations, and that teachers consistently refer to pupils' targets to show them how to improve their work.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Having joined the school with standards which are below average, pupils reach average standards by the time they leave. This represents good achievement overall. Girls make exceptionally strong progress to reach standards which are above the national average in all subjects. Boys' progress is satisfactory overall, though not as strong as the girls', mainly because of low attainment in the writing component of English. The school has correctly identified raising the writing attainment of boys of Pakistani heritage as a key priority, and is working with other schools locally on projects to address this. Pupils of Pakistani heritage make strong progress overall in the school, given their standards on entry, but their attainment remains well below that of other pupils in English. Pupils with English as an additional language make good progress as a result of effective teaching and support, both in class and in specialist withdrawal groups. Those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also achieve well as a result of early identification of need, careful monitoring of their progress, and well-judged support. The very strong improvement in science attainment since the last inspection is down to a ready availability of high quality resources supporting an exciting, practical approach to teaching and learning in the subject.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Well-planned assemblies help pupils to reflect on important cultural and spiritual themes that are also revisited inside lessons. Pupils readily take on responsibilities throughout the school such as class representatives, safety patrol officers or rotating Personal Assistants to the school dog, Bill. Bill is a cherished member of the school community and a therapeutic contributor to promoting pupils' emotional well-being. As one pupil said, 'You always feel great after a hug with Bill.' Pupils display very positive attitudes to learning. They are proud that their voice is heard in the running of the school and recognise the many achievements of their school council. Pupils feel extremely safe, and report that bullying is scarce and dealt with swiftly. They display care, respect and consideration for others, for example by raising money for charities.

Pupils value the privileges they earn through recognition of their excellent behaviour and efforts. They are confident and demonstrate a good range of skills, showing that they are well-prepared for their secondary school and their future lives. They have an excellent understanding of how to live healthy lifestyles. They participate readily in sports activities and exercise sensible choices in the canteen, where they enjoy the range of healthy options available to them at lunchtime. Attendance has risen steadily since the last inspection, reflecting an effective range of strategies in place to engage with parents and promote improvement. The school has met its attendance targets, and attendance of most pupils is good overall. However, it remains a little below the national average, partly because some parents continue to take their children on extended holidays in term time.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Relationships between pupils and their teachers are very good and mutually respectful. Teachers plan lessons well and use resources effectively, including information and communication technology (ICT), to stimulate and engage pupils' interests and to structure their learning in steps. Activities are carefully designed to enable the pupils to achieve clear learning outcomes. Very good support is provided by the teaching assistants, who are skilled and enthusiastic. They plan work closely with teachers to meet the different needs and interests of the pupils. Pupils are given the opportunity to work independently, in pairs or in small groups, where they benefit from listening to each other and sharing ideas. As a result, they develop important personal, social and learning skills. Indeed, pupils make good progress in most skills but there are insufficient planned opportunities for extended writing in lessons. Marking is very thorough and well linked to the objectives of the exercise, but it is not always related to pupils' targets and they do not all know how to improve their work to reach the next level.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

A creative approach to developing pupils' learning and thinking skills permeates the curriculum and encourages teamwork, collaboration and development of pupils' interests. Pupils speak with enthusiasm about their themed learning days, and higher attainers are excited by the extended learning opportunities they gain through the many activities for the able and talented. Provision for personal, social and health education is excellent and enables pupils to learn really well how to stay healthy and safe and to care for and about others. ICT is well planned and resourced through the curriculum and supports pupils' learning effectively, particularly with the development of a virtual learning environment that stimulates interactive learning and research skills. There are, however, insufficient planned opportunities threaded through the curriculum to strengthen and extend pupils' writing skills. The curriculum is enriched by good provision for extra-curricular activities and clubs. Pupils particularly like the arts and crafts, football and guitar clubs, and participating in the highly successful choir. Educational and residential visits are effective in extending pupils' understanding of the curriculum and experience of the local and wider world. Pupils' learning is further enhanced by the opportunities to learn a modern foreign language.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

This is a school which makes a real difference to the lives of the pupils and families it serves through the outstanding care and support it offers. It is resolute in its protection of the welfare of its pupils. Links with outside agencies to deploy support as necessary are highly effective. Procedures for safeguarding the welfare of pupils fully meet requirements. The school is highly praised by parents for its immediate response to any concerns they or their children have. One parent noted that her child 'put a note in the worry box and the next day the problem was resolved. I thought this was fantastic.' Liaison with parents through the work of the parent support adviser is also highly regarded. Pupils provide each other with a great deal of mutual support, and the first port of call if pupils have any worries or concerns is to the very effective pupil safety patrol. There are very strong links with partner infant and secondary schools to

help pupils make a smooth transition to and from the school. A good flow of information between these partner schools helps pupils' individual needs to be diagnosed early, so that those with specific needs are well supported. Academic guidance to pupils is good and supports good progress, though more reference could be made to pupils' targets to show them how to improve.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

The school's leadership, especially that of the headteacher and senior team, sets an excellent direction for the school. Good, well-informed governance helps to keep the school well ahead with innovative practice. The school is extremely successful at promoting equal opportunities, including for the most vulnerable pupils, and in countering discrimination. It has identified the relatively slower progress made by boys and set in place strategies to overcome this which are showing some success. Leaders have established open and highly constructive relationships between stakeholders and created a very harmonious school community. The active engagement of pupils in work in the local community, and work done by the school with partners in the community to raise achievement and overcome disadvantage, is a further mark of the school's good contribution to community cohesion. Thorough and accurate school self-evaluation has been highly effective in raising standards in nearly all areas since the last inspection, and informing the effective professional development of staff. However, in planning for improvement, the school does not always make success criteria sufficiently specific or measurable. Sharper use of such criteria might make the pace of improvement in standards even quicker, and help to move the school's effectiveness from 'good' to 'outstanding' overall.

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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? | 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 | 1 |

Achievement and standards

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

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|---|---|
| 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 | 2 |
| 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? | 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? | 1 |

Leadership and management

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|--|-----|
| How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners? | 1 |
| How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education | 1 |
| 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? | 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 |

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

14 January 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Alumwell Junior School, Walsall WS2 9UP

Many thanks for the welcome you gave to me and my colleagues when we visited the school for its recent inspection. We much enjoyed talking with you and seeing you at work and at play. I was delighted to hear the choir perform! You were a credit to your school throughout the inspection. You were so helpful and courteous to us, and your behaviour was exemplary. The way you help each other out and contribute to the smooth running of the school by taking on responsibilities, such as on the safety patrol or school council, makes your school a special place. As a result of the excellent care and support you get, and the many opportunities you are given to work together and show leadership, you develop excellent personal qualities. You have a very high regard for each other's safety and well-being, and an excellent understanding of how to live and eat healthily.

Our report judges Alumwell to be a good school, where you are well taught and make good progress. You clearly enjoy a good range of activities, which help to make learning fun. The school benefits from the excellent leadership of the headteacher and his senior team, who keep a very thorough check on how well the school is doing and who have ensured that standards in most subjects have improved since the last inspection. Together with the governors, the school's leaders have involved everyone in the school community, including parents and pupils, in helping the school to improve. It prepares you well for the next stage of your education.

We have suggested two main ways in which the school could improve even further. Firstly, as your standards in writing are not as strong as they are in other subjects, we have asked the school to give you more opportunities to write at length in subjects across the curriculum. Secondly, targets need to be used a little better, both to show you how to improve your work and to set the school clearer goals to aim at. We are sure that you will continue to make excellent contributions to the school, attend school regularly, and try your best to improve your work.

Best wishes for the future,

Ian Hodgkinson

Lead inspector