

Stephenson Lower School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109502
Local Authority	Bedford Borough
Inspection number	324973
Inspection dates	21–22 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Rosemary Eaton

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	First
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	426
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	48
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Mark Kennedy
Headteacher	Mr Robert Harris
Date of previous school inspection	3 May 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Canvin Way Off Oak Road Bedford Bedfordshire MK42 0HL
Telephone number	01234 261683
Fax number	01234 213572

Age group	3–9
Inspection dates	21–22 May 2009
Inspection number	324973

© Crown copyright 2009

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

This is a larger-than-average first school. It serves an area of some social and economic disadvantage. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is very much greater than average. The majority of pupils are White British. However, the proportions from minority ethnic backgrounds and in the early stages of learning to speak English are larger than average. Other than English, the languages spoken most often in pupils' homes are Bengali, Punjabi and Urdu. The percentage of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is broadly average. The school has provision for pupils with hearing impairment. This is overseen by the local authority. Currently, there are five children on the roll of the unit, all of whom have statements of special educational needs. The school provides for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage through Stephenson Pre-School, and Nursery and Reception classes. The pre-school receives funding for nursery education for three- and four-year-olds. It is registered for child care and is open each weekday during term time for a maximum of 24 children at any one time. The school's awards include Investors in People and the Activemark.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

This is a satisfactory and improving school which already has some good features. These include pupils' personal development, the care, guidance and support provided, and the provision made for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Effective links with other schools and varied agencies and professionals support the school's work well.

Parents think very highly of the school, often stressing how much their children enjoy their time here. 'My son would run to school if I let him,' is a typical comment. Pupils show clearly that they are very happy. One remarked, 'I like this school because I have lots of friends.' Any pupil on their own in the playground is soon approached by others and invited to play. By looking out for each other in this way, pupils follow the caring example set by leaders and staff. They feel safe in school, behave well and they are adamant that there is no bullying.

Despite making good progress during the Early Years Foundation Stage, most pupils start Year 1 working at levels below those typical for their age. They make satisfactory progress as they move up through the school. By the end of Year 4, standards are below average but not exceptionally low. The school's assessments of the performance of its current Year 2 and Year 4 pupils indicate that standards are rising and progress is accelerating, particularly in mathematics and reading. Although work has begun to improve pupils' writing, standards are lowest and achievement is weakest in this aspect of learning. Pupils' achievement is satisfactory overall, being in line with the quality of teaching. Teachers frequently plan interesting activities, successfully encouraging pupils to try their best. Often, work is matched closely to what each pupil needs to learn next. On other occasions, there is not enough additional challenge for the highest attaining pupils and so their learning slows down for part or the entire lesson. The pupils with hearing impairment achieve well owing to high quality specialist teaching and support and because they are included fully in school life.

Pupils enjoy 'Super Learning Days'. These are amongst the highlights of the satisfactory curriculum and enable pupils to focus on particular topics. For example, their good awareness of healthy lifestyles was recently enhanced by a day of relevant activities. Pupils in Year 4 look forward to the annual residential visit. The school sees to it that each of them is included in this event, reflecting its strong commitment to providing equal opportunities for all. Pupils readily spend time at home, working on their 'learning logs'. These help teachers, parents and pupils to evaluate how much pupils have learned about a particular aspect of their work. Work done in class is not marked consistently well and so pupils are not always clear about how they can improve.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The headteacher, with strong support from the enthusiastic senior leadership team, has ensured that the school has become much more focused on raising standards than at the time of the previous school inspection. Accurate self-evaluation, careful planning for improvement, and readiness to seek advice and support, have contributed to moving the school forward. There are clear signs that pupils are starting to achieve more, indicating that the school has satisfactory capacity to improve further. It provides satisfactory value for money.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

The provision is good and children achieve correspondingly well. When the three-year-olds join the Nursery or the pre-school, their skills are often well below those typical for this age group, particularly in the areas of communication, language and literacy, and problem solving, reasoning and numeracy. By the end of the Reception Year, children's skills are less well developed than is typical but this represents good progress from their starting points. Teaching is good. Staff are skilled at observing children and seizing opportunities to extend their learning. Seeing a group of pre-school children throwing a ball, staff set up an activity that built on this interest, developed their coordination and knowledge of mathematical shapes, and encouraged them to share and take turns. Learning opportunities offer a well-judged balance of activities led by adults and others chosen by children. Children take responsibility for operating timers to regulate their use of particularly popular toys so that, for example, they can all play with bikes and super-hero costumes. All children have plenty of opportunities to learn outdoors. However, the facilities attached to Reception classrooms do not allow those children the same freedom to run, climb and ride bikes that younger children enjoy. Children's personal development is outstanding. They behave very well and are extremely happy and sociable learners. Staff teach them to recognise their feelings and how they can help if another child looks sad. They become very independent, deciding when to have their snack and organising their food and drink. Good leadership ensures that staff across the provision share consistent approaches and high expectations, so children move smoothly from pre-school and Nursery to Reception. Partnerships with parents are strong and contribute to the good arrangements for children's welfare.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and improve achievement in writing.
- Make certain that teaching consistently provides additional challenge for higher attaining pupils.
- Ensure that marking informs pupils how they can improve their work.

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 below average. Overall, the current Year 2 and Year 4 pupils are performing at levels below those expected for their age. However, there are strong signs that standards in mathematics and reading are rising. For example, there is an increase in the proportion of Year 2 pupils working at the higher National Curriculum level (Level 3) in reading. Standards are lowest in writing. In 2008, attainment in English and mathematics dipped and was particularly weak in both Year 2 and Year 4. The school's assessment information indicates that this set-back was temporary. Progress and achievement are satisfactory. The school's tracking data suggest that this year's Year 2 and Year 4 pupils are broadly on line to meet their targets for reading and mathematics but progress remains less strong in writing. The pupils who find learning particularly difficult make satisfactory progress from their individual starting points, owing to good quality support. Girls and boys, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and those in the early stages of learning English make progress at the same rate as others with similar starting

points. The progress of a very few pupils is slowed down by their low levels of attendance. Pupils learn signing, helping them to communicate with pupils who have hearing impairments.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

One parent observed, 'I would recommend this school to any parent who wants a confident, happy child.' This is an apt description of Stephenson's pupils and reflects their good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Boys and girls work and play harmoniously together, regardless of their circumstances or ethnic background. 'We will always be friends,' declared two boys. Although they enjoy school so much, attendance is satisfactory rather than good. Most pupils attend regularly and the overall trend is one of year-on-year improvement. However, despite the school's determined efforts, a very small number of parents keep their children at home unnecessarily. Pupils are well aware of how to be healthy and safe. From their first introduction to education, children learn to consider others and this contributes to the closeness of the school community. Pupils readily accept responsibility. They start as 'Tidy Nursery Helpers' and by Year 4 take on numerous jobs that help the school to run smoothly. Pupils raise significant funds for local and national charities. Their well-developed social skills and positive attitudes ensure that in spite of below average academic performance, pupils are prepared satisfactorily for moving on to middle school.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall but there is a growing proportion of good and outstanding practice to be shared. Working relationships between adults and pupils are very positive. As a result, pupils are confident to tackle new work and to attempt to answer questions. Because they like their teachers and are generally interested in their work, pupils behave well. However, on the occasions when activities run on for too long or are mundane, pupils lose focus and the pace of learning slows. The skills of teaching assistants are frequently used well to support learning. The communicators who work with pupils with hearing impairments make a significant contribution to the good progress they make, for example, by ensuring that teachers appreciate the best place for these children to be seated. The school collects a growing range of assessment information, particularly about how well pupils progress in literacy and numeracy. When pupils are organised into groups according to their attainment in these areas, teaching often makes efficient use of assessment information in order to cater for the needs of each pupil. However, when the class is working together, for example, to answer teachers' questions, or the task set is the same for all pupils, it is not always clear how the highest attaining pupils are being helped to take their next step in learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The school is successfully developing the curriculum further. For example, in order to smooth their transition from the Early Years Foundation Stage, pupils in Year 1 have increasing opportunities to learn independently through play. The use of themes to link subjects together is growing steadily, particularly in Key Stage 1. Pupils who find learning especially difficult or those whose learning needs a boost in order to help them reach their targets spend part of

their time in smaller classes with work adapted to their needs. The programme of enrichment activities includes a popular sports club, run by coaches from the community, Indian dancing, and a signing group. The choir has twice performed at the Royal Albert Hall. Pupils have satisfactory opportunities to go on visits linked to the curriculum: for example, to a museum to find out about life in Roman times.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school gives high priority to pupils' safety and well-being and meets current government safeguarding requirements. Child protection procedures are well established and effective. Potential risks to pupils' safety are carefully assessed and suitable steps taken to minimise them. Pastoral support is good. The role of the learning mentor is developing swiftly and offers increasingly good support to vulnerable pupils. Systems to promote good behaviour and regular attendance are comprehensive and enable individuals to improve their learning. Good liaison with external agencies ensures pupils who find learning more difficult are supported well. Pupils in the early stages of learning English are given suitable support from bilingual staff. Effective links with middle schools enable pupils to transfer smoothly at the end of Year 4. Academic guidance is satisfactory. Pupils' targets are displayed prominently in each class. Marking is usually encouraging but does not always indicate how pupils could improve their work.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The school's clear view of its strengths and where improvement is needed stems from a suitable range of monitoring activities, such as a rigorous programme of lesson observations and recently introduced discussions about the progress made by pupils in each class. The information gathered is used to identify ways to improve the performance of individual staff and pupils and feeds into plans to move the school forward. As a result, for example, the quality of teaching has improved. However, not all those with leadership roles are sufficiently involved in monitoring and evaluation. Governance is satisfactory. Governors are very committed and keen to develop their expertise. To this end, a steering group of governors is establishing ways to increase their capacity to contribute to school self-assessment. Community cohesion is promoted satisfactorily. Leaders and governors are working to improve the school's contribution, for example, by developing partnerships within and beyond the local community.

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?	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

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?	2
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	2
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	2

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/or disabilities make progress	3

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?	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
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	3
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 learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

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 eliminated	2
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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

Annex B

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

26 May 2009

Dear Children

Inspection of Stephenson Lower School, Bedford, MK42 0HL

Thank you for being so polite, friendly and helpful when we visited your school. We really enjoyed meeting you and seeing you working and playing. This letter is to tell you what we found out about the school. It is a satisfactory school which is getting better all the time.

One of the best things about the school is your good personal development. You told us you like school and have lots of friends. You behave well and most of you attend school regularly. You know how to be safe and healthy and you look out for each other and do lots of jobs to help your teachers. The school takes good care of you so you can relax and do your work. The children in the pre-school, Nursery and Reception have lots of interesting activities and they make good progress.

In Years 1 to 4 you make satisfactory progress but we have asked the school to help you to do better in writing. Sometimes the work set in lessons is too easy for those of you who are fast learners. We want the school to make sure you all have to try hard in every lesson. You can help by saying if work is too easy - or too difficult. We know that you want to do well and we noticed that when your books are marked you aren't always told how you can improve your work. We have asked the school to make sure that marking is always helpful. We know that you will follow your teachers' advice.

Your headteacher and the staff have lots of good ideas for improving the school, so each of you learns as much as possible and has fun at the same time. We send them and all of you our very best wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely

Rosemary Eaton

Lead inspector