

Henlow VC Middle School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109695
Local Authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	325009
Inspection dates	22–23 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Michael Miller

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

Type of school	Middle deemed secondary
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	9–13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	554
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Beverly Aberdein
Headteacher	Mr Ray Payne
Date of previous school inspection	7 June 2006
School address	Church Road Henlow Bedfordshire SG16 6AN
Telephone number	01462 813733
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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

This is a large middle-deemed-secondary school serving the Henlow area to the south east of Bedford. The large majority of pupils are of White British ethnic origin; the balance comes from a variety of other ethnic groups. The proportion of pupils for whom English is an additional language is well below average. The percentage of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is well below average. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is broadly average. However, the percentage of pupils with a statement of special educational needs is above average. The proportion of pupils who enter or leave the school, other than at the normal time at the start of Year 5, is much higher than average. The school has gained the National Healthy Schools Award, the Football Association Charter Standard and Sports Mark, and the Gold Arts Mark awards.

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 good value for money. It enables its pupils to make good progress, from the broadly average standards they have attained by the start of Year 5, to standards which are above those expected for their age group by the time they leave in Year 8. They are enabled to do this because of the good quality of teaching which underpins securely the pupils' good learning. Pupils who have difficulty with their learning receive good, individual support. Consequently, they are enabled to make good progress to attain standards above that for similar groups nationally. Overall, pupils achieve well during their time at the school and are prepared effectively for their next stage of education.

The very large majority of pupils and their parents/carers confirm that their children enjoy school. Pupils talk openly about the fun they have in learning and the support provided for them by their teachers. Working relationships are of high quality, and the level of pastoral care provided for the pupils is excellent. Procedures for ensuring the safeguarding of pupils meet fully current government requirements. Pupils understand very well how to stay safe, and support each other very well in their endeavours to do so. Pupils also know how to stay healthy and take part enthusiastically in the many and regular opportunities for sport and exercise. The school is a civilised community where pupils develop responsibly as young citizens. The school is successful in promoting an ethos where pupils' moral and social values are developed particularly well. Consequently, pupils' personal development is outstanding and a strength of the school. As a parent/carer wrote, 'This is a school which not only encourages achievement, but also takes great care with the social and emotional development of its pupils.'

A further strength of the school is its curriculum; its range and scope has been designed particularly well to meet the needs of individual pupils. The school has a very strong tradition in the provision of extra-curricular clubs and other activities. Themed days and weeks, such as Arts Week, are particularly successful. Pupils are challenged well, both by what is taught and by how it is taught. The development of key skills, in areas such as literacy, are supported well through other subjects. Pupils' writing skills have improved because teachers have common expectations of the standards to be reached, which they apply effectively in subjects other than English. The school is improving its provision through the development of good tracking systems which are identifying early any potential underachievement. This is enabling the school to put in place effective measures to support both individuals and groups of pupils. However, whilst assessment strategies in support of learning and teaching are developing well, they are not embedded consistently enough in all lessons across all subjects. Similarly, marking does not always reinforce teachers' helpful, oral feedback in lessons concerning pupils' next steps in learning.

The school has a strong leadership team. The school development plan is focused well on the development of more effective practice in the promotion of individualised and personalised learning for the pupils. The school is becoming rich in data about its pupils. However, not all leaders have developed the strategic skills to interpret and use this data consistently effectively, although there is a strong desire to learn and share good practice. Nevertheless, leadership and management are good overall at all levels, and the school has created a robust track record in support of its good capacity for further and continued improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure all teaching applies consistently good strategies for assessing pupils' work in lessons and marking provides clear guidance to the next learning steps.
- Share the good practice within the school to ensure leaders, at all levels, analyse, interpret and use effectively performance data to aid pupils' progress.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Pupils enter the school in Year 5 from a wide variety of other schools, both locally, nationally and internationally. Data provided by the feeder schools, coupled with nationally recognised testing by the school itself at the start of Year 5, show that attainment on entry is broadly average. However, some 15% of pupils, have reading ages at least a year below their chronological age. The nature of the local workforce also means there are high mobility rates. In the current Key Stage 2, for example, 30% of the pupils have either joined or left the school before the end of Year 6. These factors lead to challenges for the school in order to ensure a continuity of education for its pupils. However, during Years 5 and 6, the school does enable pupils to make satisfactory progress. In the 2008 national tests, Year 6 pupils gained average standards. The school takes an increasing number of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities from other areas within the local authority. Such pupils make good progress at the school, and in the 2008 tests gained standards above those for similar pupils nationally. Pupils make particularly good progress in Years 7 and 8 to attain standards above those expected for their age by the time they leave for upper school. Consequently, pupils achieve well during their time at the school.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils' spiritual, social, moral and cultural development is excellent. They have high self-esteem, self-confidence and have great respect for the beliefs, views and feelings of others. Pupils demonstrate high quality social skills and mature attitudes to school and each other. Pupils' behaviour is exemplary, as demonstrated through sensible conduct, polite manners and friendly working relationships. Pupils feel safe in school and are confident that adults will sort out the rare instances of bullying extremely quickly and effectively. Pupils enjoy school immensely. Attendance is above average. Pupils have an astute understanding of how to keep fit and healthy. Pupils make an outstanding contribution to the school, local and global communities. They take full advantage of any opportunities to use their initiative. The school council is involved fully in school decision-making processes, and a group of pupils contributed recently to the village plan. Young sports leaders lead successful sporting events for lower school pupils, and entertain regularly members from various village groups and organisations. The school's sponsorship of a pupil in Ghana helps build effectively pupils' empathy for the lives of others. Excellent social skills, and above average key academic skills, prepare pupils very well for their next school and adult life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Pupils are keen to learn and to make good progress. Teaching is matched well to the full range of abilities within each class and is sufficiently challenging for the more able. Typically, teachers demonstrate very high levels of subject knowledge and provide clear explanations. They capture pupils' interest through imaginative and varied activities. Question and answer sessions are planned well, providing pupils with good opportunities to clarify and extend their understanding. Consequently, a number of outstanding lessons were seen. Teaching assistants are valued highly, play an important role, and ensure pupils are supported well in lessons. However, teachers' use of assessment to review or re-direct learning is not yet applied consistently in all lessons. Occasionally, this results in missed opportunities to promote pupils' contributions, or to provide that little extra challenge for higher attaining pupils. Teachers are engaged actively in developing personal learning targets for each pupil, and pupils know these. However, although teachers' verbal feedback to pupils in lessons is usually good, this is not reinforced consistently through related written comments when marking books. Nevertheless, where this does happen, marking boosts the progress individual pupils make. Furthermore, pupils' learning, and their understanding of what they need to do to improve, benefit well from opportunities to assess their own and other pupils' work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The school is looking constantly for ways to make pupils' learning experiences relevant, fun, rich and varied. Personal, social and health education are particularly strong and help pupils to make informed choices about their personal fitness and well-being. Provision for design and technology, and art, is excellent. Pupils' attitude towards modern foreign languages is positive, with some highly creative German taster sessions for Year 8 pupils, preparing them well for the subject at upper school. Pupils have good economic awareness with many opportunities to build these skills both in lessons and after school. Cross-curricular work is stimulating and characterised by 'Super Learning Days' where there are excellent opportunities for pupils to develop their transferable skills. Provision for information and communication technology (ICT) is exemplary with laptop computers used across the school. ICT boosts the level of boys' literacy skills because they warm to using the school's virtual learning environment. The extensive range of extra-curricular activities, and educational visits, broadens pupils' horizons and has a very high take-up rate. The school's whole curriculum provision adds considerable enjoyment to the pupils' time at school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school caters extremely well for the pupils' personal and emotional well-being, and pastoral care is excellent. The comprehensive procedures for ensuring pupils' welfare are robust and all members of staff ensure these are followed rigorously. All current safeguarding requirements are met fully. The school promotes and encourages sensitively the pupils' good behaviour, and is quick in providing support and guidance when any improvements in pupils' behaviour are required.

Academic guidance is effective overall, helping pupils to make good progress. At the start of each lesson, pupils know clearly from their teachers what they are expected to learn by the end of the lesson. Pupils' subsequent involvement in the assessment of their work and accomplishments gives them a positive understanding of their own learning. Pupils who find some learning more difficult receive good guidance in lessons from teachers and teaching assistants alike. However, while marking and pupils' individual targets are relevant, they are sometimes too general. Consequently, pupils do not always receive consistently specific guidance as to why a particular piece of work is good or excellent, and precisely what they need to improve further.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The good leadership and management of the school stem from good teamwork. There is a strong and realistic desire to move towards excellence. Consequently, the school has succeeded well in improving from being satisfactory at its last inspection to become good. In this quest, the school has been ably supported by a governing body which knows well the school's strengths and areas for further improvement. It fulfils its role well as a questioning, critical friend to the school. Governors help ensure the school's resources are used wisely in support of pupils and their learning. The headteacher, ably supported by other senior and middle leaders, has created a very positive, focused ethos and atmosphere for learning where pupils thrive. Leaders and managers 'practice what they preach' when they encourage learners always to aspire to reach their potential, and beyond.

Effective use is being made of the school's good, but relatively new, tracking systems. However, some leaders, at both more senior and middle management levels, are still developing and honing their skills in the interpretation and use of data. Furthermore, some subject leaders are still working on, and establishing, assessment practices to move learning and teaching within their subjects beyond the good. Leaders are practical in the ways they challenge each other, so they are able to set the pupils suitably challenging, but realistic targets, and self-evaluation is good. There are good links with support agencies, education partners and the broader community. Community cohesion, both within and beyond the school's own community, is good. The support the large majority of parents/carers show for the school, is summed up by one who wrote, 'The school's leaders are enthusiastic, striving to give the children as many opportunities and encouragement as possible.'

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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?	2
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/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	2
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?	2
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?	2

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 eliminated	2
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**

24 June 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Henlow VC Middle School, Henlow, Bedfordshire, SG16 6AN

As a team, and right from our very first encounters with you on the first day of the inspection, we were very impressed by your politeness, courtesy and open responses to the questions we asked of you. We would like to thank you for this. You played a very significant part in the success of the inspection. We agree with your teachers, and the great majority of your parents/carers, that yours is a good school.

These are the things we found are best about your school.

- Your individual development as responsible young citizens is excellent.
- The help and guidance you receive from staff supports you well as individuals.
- The pastoral care you receive from teachers and other staff is excellent.
- You have good teachers who enable you to learn well and make good progress.
- The curriculum is excellent, and your school is always looking for ways to make your learning and experience at school relevant, fun, rich and varied.
- Your school is led and managed well and enables you to gain above average standards by the time you leave the school in Year 8.

What we have asked your school to do now.

- To develop further the good assessment strategies your teachers use to help you make good progress, and ensure the comments they write when marking your work reflect and reinforce the verbal advice they give you in lessons.
- To ensure that all your school's leaders, from subject leaders to governors, continue to develop their skills in the use of the good quality information they collect about your attainment, in order to help you make even better progress.

In your music room there is a notice which reads, 'The first place to practice being successful is in your head.' In your work and actions you have shown that you understand clearly what this means. We simply ask you to continue in this vein.

With all best wishes for your future,

Michael Miller

Lead inspector