

Ad Astra First School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113742
Local Authority	Poole
Inspection number	325875
Inspection date	23 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Diane Wilkinson

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	4–8
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	332
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	0
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Chas Rowling
Headteacher	Valarie Arbon
Date of previous school inspection	22 February 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Sherborn Crescent Canford Heath Poole BH17 8AP
Telephone number	01202 602113
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Age group	4–8
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues:

- How effectively the school is working to maintain pupils' rate of progress in light of the declining standards on entry.
- The extent to which the school has improved pupils' progress in writing.
- How successful the school is in ensuring that girls achieve as well as boys and that higher attaining pupils reach the standards of which they are capable.

Evidence was gathered from lesson observations, analysis of school tracking and assessment data, documents relating to monitoring and development and from discussions with the headteacher, senior staff, members of the governing body and pupils. The views of parents were gathered from discussions and the returns of the Ofsted and the school's own questionnaires.

Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation form, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Ad Astra is a relatively large first school. About half of the small number of pupils who speak English as an additional language are at the early stages of learning English. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average and significantly so in some year groups. These pupils' needs cover specific learning, physical, speech, language and communication, and emotional, behavioural and social difficulties, together with hearing, visual impairment and autism. The school holds the Healthy School and International School awards, together with Investors in People, Inclusion Quality Mark and Artsmark status. It is also a leading school in the area for supporting initial teacher training.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Ad Astra is an outstanding school. The high quality care and support pupils receive from the time they start in Reception helps to ensure that they make excellent progress in both their personal and academic development. Pupils love coming to school, behave exceptionally well and work very hard in lessons. Parents are delighted with all the school has to offer. They are very confident that their children are safe and happy there and are helped to do their very best. A considerable number of parents made comments such as, 'We are delighted with both the academic and pastoral care which we believe has come from dynamic and outstanding leadership', 'We are very happy with the school in all areas' and 'I am proud to say that my children attend Ad Astra First School.'

The major reasons for the school's success are the high quality leadership and management at all levels and the determination of all who work there to provide the very best education and care possible for all pupils. The headteacher is a visionary and inspirational leader who brings out the best in her staff and is exceptionally good at enabling and supporting them to develop the skills needed to help move the school forward. Outstanding partnerships have been created with parents and a range of other schools and agencies which enhance pupils' welfare and learning especially well. Self-evaluation is of the highest quality, being very regular and rigorous so that the school quickly identifies what needs to be done and puts in place strategies to bring about improvement. The creation of development teams, which are exceptionally well led by senior staff, is very effective in ensuring that weaker aspects of the school's work are successfully and speedily addressed. Governors provide excellent support and play an important part in monitoring and development work. They visit the school very regularly, consulting with pupils and supporting staff. These strengths have ensured the school has made excellent improvement since its last inspection and is exceptionally well placed to continue to do so.

The very caring and supportive environment has created in pupils a determination to do their best. As one member of staff commented, 'Very few pupils say "I can't..."' Despite standards on entry declining since the last inspection, the way that staff have adapted provision and helped pupils to recognise that they can do well has ensured standards have continued to rise. On entry to Reception, children's skills are well below those expected for this age. Not surprisingly, they leave Year 3 with standards above expectations. More pupils now reach higher levels in the Year 2 national tests, where standards are above average, although better in reading and mathematics than in writing. The new mathematics programme has improved pupils' progress especially well, with all reaching average levels this year, despite a considerable number having learning difficulties. The school is determined to achieve a similar result in writing where levels were not as high. All pupils achieve equally well, including boys and girls, and also higher attaining pupils and those who have learning, language or behavioural needs.

Outstanding pastoral support ensures pupils make excellent progress in their personal development and that the school fulfils its duty to promote the Every Child Matters requirements exceptionally well. High priority is given to ensuring government requirements with regard to the safeguarding and well-being of pupils are fulfilled including in before and after school clubs. Moral and social development are outstanding. As a result, pupils are very mature for their age and play a major part in the life of their school and community. They have an excellent understanding of how to achieve healthy and safe lifestyles. Pupils' awareness of cultures in other countries is excellent. This, together with the school's very friendly and harmonious ethos, ensures that community cohesion is promoted effectively. The school is now working hard to

help pupils develop a greater awareness of the cultural diversity in British society. The many opportunities for working together and pupils' determination to rise to the challenge staff set for them helps prepare them exceptionally well for their future life. Having successfully decreased incidences of poor attendance and the number of term time holidays, the school achieves its attendance targets and levels are around average.

Excellent procedures are in place for assessing and monitoring pupils' progress and staff use the information from this exceptionally well to promote further progress. The check kept on the most vulnerable pupils is exemplary. The school is extremely proactive in liaising with other agencies to secure the very best support for these pupils. Another notable strength is the half-termly meetings held between the headteacher and year leaders to discuss each pupil's progress, ensuring that provision is quickly adjusted to meet their emerging needs. This results in the school providing an outstanding curriculum, including for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage, which supports pupils' progress exceptionally well. The new programme for teaching letters and sounds, where pupils regularly move between groups as they progress, has had a major impact on raising standards in reading and spelling. In addition, the setting of pupils in ability groups for English and mathematics also promotes their learning especially well. Activities are interesting and relevant and the problem-solving approach is especially good at helping pupils to use their literacy and numeracy skills in topic work. The school grounds are very well cared for and have been developed into an exciting and stimulating learning environment. For example, pupils' curiosity in learning about minibeasts is enhanced by the presence of the many that live in the compost heap. In addition, a very good number of visits and visitors enrich pupils' experiences and learning.

Teaching and learning are consistently good, although there is some variation in quality, largely due to the considerable number of staff who are new to the school or are relatively new to the profession. Nevertheless, the high quality monitoring and support for teaching, which has led to the school being identified as a leader in initial teacher training, ensures that strategies are already in place to address weaker aspects, with a positive impact being seen. A great strength is the excellent relationships adults have with pupils, creating in the latter a great desire to learn. Outstanding behaviour management ensures pupils behave extremely well in lessons. Planning is very good and all pupils know exactly what they have to do. Most teachers are very good at setting highly challenging goals for pupils. However, on a small number of occasions, especially in writing, staff underestimate what these very keen pupils can achieve, especially when they have learning difficulties. In particular, they sometimes give too much advice on what the correct answer should be rather than helping pupils to find it out for themselves. In addition, when marking work, they do not always point out how this could improve, especially in the presentation. Teaching assistants make a major contribution to learning, although a few staff are not as skilled as others at capitalising on this.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 1

Under their outstanding leader, the Early Years Foundation Stage team has very successfully built on and developed the high quality provision seen at the last inspection. In particular, the new programme for teaching reading and writing is having a very positive impact on the progress of children, especially the many who start school with low skills in this area. From the well below standards on entry, children make exceptionally good progress, with the vast majority reaching average levels by the time they move on to Year 1. Induction is very good and helps children settle into school well. This, together with the genuine care and support adults provide, creates

in children the outstanding attitudes to learning that significantly underpin their excellent progress throughout the school.

Children's personal development is outstanding, with children becoming confident, very friendly and helpful young people, playing or working very happily together and developing excellent independence skills. Children are very good at choosing and organising their own tasks, selecting equipment, persevering at activities and tidying away afterwards. The provision for children's learning and development is outstanding, as was observed in an excellent activity where children designed and wrote their own books about minibeasts. The close teamwork seen amongst all who work in Reception ensures that a consistent approach is maintained at all times. Assessment and tracking of children's progress is of exceptional quality so that activities are continually evolving in order to meet children's needs and to challenge all to do their very best.

What the school should do to improve further

- Help all pupils to do as well in English as they do in mathematics through ensuring that all staff recognise what the lower attainers can achieve in writing and provide a high level of challenge and support to encourage them to do so.

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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?	1
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

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	1
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	1
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?	1
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	1

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	2
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	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	1

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?	1

Leadership and management

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	1
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	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
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 Ad Astra First School, Poole, BH17 8AP

Thank you for welcoming us to your school. We very much enjoyed being with you and were very impressed by the things you do. We think your school is excellent and are delighted that you and your parents think so too.

- Here are some of the things we found out were especially good about the school.
- You make excellent progress and standards are above those expected for Year 3 pupils by the time you leave. We think you have all done really well in mathematics this year and you are very good at learning to sound out and spell new words.
- You do really well in your personal development. We were especially impressed by how mature you are and your excellent behaviour and attitudes to your work.
- Staff take very good care of you and are especially good at helping those of you who need a lot of extra support.
- Adults provide lots of interesting activities for you to do and we think you are becoming really good at solving problems and investigating new things.
- Staff keep an excellent check on how well you are doing and are very good at planning new work to help you do even better.
- You have an outstanding headteacher, and all staff and governors are especially good at helping your school to improve all the time.
- Here is what we have asked the school to improve.
- Most pupils who do not always find learning easy have done really well in writing this year, but a few of them have not done quite so well as they did in mathematics. We have asked staff to help them do just as well in writing. You can help by carrying on trying to do your very best.

Thank you again for all your help and good luck for the future.

Yours faithfully

D Wilkinson

Lead Inspector