

Groombridge St Thomas CE (VA) Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	114559
Local Authority	East Sussex
Inspection number	326039
Inspection dates	19–20 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Kevin Hodge

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 under pilot arrangements; it was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	205
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Ray Donelan
Headteacher	Angela Nicholls
Date of previous school inspection	May 2006
School address	Corsley Road Groombridge Tunbridge Wells TN3 9SF
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Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 13 lessons, and held meetings with school staff, governors and pupils. They observed the school's work, and looked at the school improvement plan, governors' minutes. School routines, including monitoring and assessment procedures, work portfolios and 47 parent questionnaires returned to the inspection team were also examined.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following.

- The progress of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- The quality of pupils' current work and whether it matches the high standards reached in national tests.
- The level of pupils' multicultural awareness and knowledge of others from different parts of the United Kingdom and beyond.
- How well senior managers use self-evaluation to help maintain the school's performance and improve it further.

Information about the school

This is an average sized primary school with pupils from the local village and surrounding area. Most pupils are from White British families, a few are from minority ethnic groups and very few are learning to speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average. There are term-time breakfast and multi-activity clubs run within the school by the governing body.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

This is an outstanding school, as the vast majority of pupils, parents and carers recognise and champion. The key factors in its continuing success are:

- exceptionally high standards in pupils' academic work
- excellent achievement, which extends into subjects such as information and communication technology (ICT), music and art
- pupils' extremely mature attitudes and excellent behaviour, all of which drive their determination for high standards
- a good start in the Reception class, where children's welfare is catered for to an exceptional standard
- innovative and exciting activities in lessons, so that pupils willingly rise to the challenge of learning
- consistently excellent teaching over time, which sets very high expectations, particularly in the teaching of writing, mathematical work, science and ICT
- pupils' very secure sense of their place within the local community and much further away
- extremely strong teamwork among senior leaders, who are led by an headteacher who is determined that there is always more to be done to maintain high standards
- governors' very high level of support for initiatives and in challenging the school to maintain its outstanding performance.

Senior leaders have successfully taken on the challenging task of maintaining the school's excellent levels of effectiveness recognised in the last inspection, while also seeking to improve and 'fine-tune' aspects of the school's work. An improved curriculum, which is now outstanding, engages pupils' interests even more than it has in the past. In particular, it now incorporates more about developing the pupils' knowledge and awareness of others who are from different cultures or have contrasting beliefs. The good start children make in the Reception class lays a solid foundation for their skills in most areas. The school is well aware that it still needs to raise the quality of outdoor learning for these children, including the skill of adults in promoting this important aspect of early education. The area outside can only be used in dry weather and has comparatively limited resources. It therefore does not extend children's experience to the extent it should, especially in their creative development. The school's excellent capacity for sustaining further improvement is

reflected in its track record of maintaining the high quality of its overall effectiveness.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of the outside area for Early Years Foundation Stage by:
 - having a covered area so indoor based activities can extend outside in all weathers
 - increasing the range of resources to promote and stimulate children's creative development
 - increasing the expertise of adults so they can help pupils make the best use of outdoor resources.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

Pupils reach high standards in both their academic work and levels of personal development and this contributes to them achieving extremely well. This highly positive picture sets them up superbly well for their next stage of education and beyond. Their attainment in English, mathematics and science remains high, as it was at the time of the school's last inspection. Children's good grounding in the Early Years Foundation Stage, particularly in their writing, reading and social development, aids their smooth transfer into Year 1. Their social skills develop rapidly, so children interact and play together very cooperatively. The comparatively limited resources for outside play, however, mean that their creative development is proving relatively harder to foster or extend.

In Years 2 and 6, test results have been consistently high over several years. The pupils' aptitude for work develops to a high degree, which aides their progress throughout the school. It is equally outstanding for all groups of pupils, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Children with specific emotional or medical conditions have positive approaches to their work. This consistent and even progress through the school is reflected in their day-to-day work. Pupils' writing is of a consistently high quality. Story writing is imaginative, well structured and accurately punctuated. Older pupils in Year 6 were finishing excellent short stories for their Year 1 'buddies'. These were very appealing as they were pitched at the right level and crafted with great care. The small number of pupils who are from minority ethnic backgrounds keep up with classmates as they have very good support.

Standards in both science and mathematics are also high. Pupils handle number problems with accuracy and increasing complexity as they reach Year 6 and they apply these skills in 'real life' contexts. Investigation work in science is a strength. Simple investigations in Year 2, to more complex challenges like transferring power in a model car, illustrate their enthusiasm for this subject.

Pupils' willingness to work together, their mature social skills and attitudes contribute markedly to the progress they make. The school environment is extremely safe and staff ensure each child feels unique. This gives pupils the confidence to shine in the work they do. Other activities, such as instrumental music tuition, sports, staging a

'mini-opera' or designing assemblies about different faiths, are the end result of the outstanding way pupils' personal development is fostered. The early morning breakfast and out of school clubs aide the pupils' social skills and activity levels. Pupils say they are given 'great things to do' and the 'staff are the best thing about school'. The school council sets challenges for fellow pupils, and the most recent has been to raise funds for a good cause. Activity levels are high both at playtimes and in lessons, where additional sports coaching entuses pupils to adopt healthy lifestyles.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' attainment ¹	1
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	1
The quality of learning for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their progress	1
How well do pupils achieve and enjoy their learning?	1
To what extent do pupils feel safe?	1
How well do pupils behave?	1
To what extent do pupils adopt healthy lifestyles?	1
To what extent do pupils contribute to the school and wider community?	1
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
How well do pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being?	1
What is the extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development?	1

How effective is the provision?

The pupils' view that lessons are fun, interesting and challenging is borne out in the high quality of their work. Teaching, which is typically excellent throughout the school, promotes engaging and stimulating activities, planned carefully to cater for all levels of ability. While teaching is usually of high quality, the way that children are stretched in their creative development and play-based activities is not capitalised upon sufficiently. In Years 1 to 6, topic work is a frequently enjoyed approach, which incorporates high levels of literacy, mathematical and ICT skills. Pupils say they feel involved in lessons. Pupils in Year 5, for example, enjoyed being interviewed 'live on television' by the class teacher to explain how they had persuaded others to their point of view. Nevertheless, in a small minority of lesson activities pupils do not get down to their activities quickly enough as some teachers' explanations are too lengthy. Marking of pupils' work is of high quality. Pupils know their targets and how to improve their work.

Underpinning the progress pupils make is the teachers' ability to draw on an excellent curriculum, which is interesting, varied and innovative, but also maintains a clear focus on developing pupils' basic skills. Topics vary throughout the year and

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

cover a very diverse range, from historically based, to scientific or artistic themes. Pupils also benefit from numerous day trips away from school and residential visits. Many visitors, including dance and opera companies, help enrich class-based activities. Well-developed links within the community and direct and regular contacts with a school in Brazil broaden the pupils' horizons. As a result, they speak extremely knowledgeably about pupils with differing beliefs and traditions.

Parents and pupils are rightly impressed with the school's excellent levels of support, guidance and care. Pupils say they feel extremely safe and have someone they can turn to if troubled. Those pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities benefit from very detailed planning for their needs, and they take an active part within lessons as they are supported extremely skilfully by adult helpers. Extra booster activities outside of class, such as ensuring they know their letter sounds by 'hooking' them with a magnetic 'fishing rod', is typical of the imaginative way activities are planned. As a result, these pupils keep pace with their peers. The school works extremely well with other organisations, local secondary schools and outside professionals. These links are particularly effective in supporting those pupils with severe medical or emotional needs.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	1
The use of assessment to support learning	1
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher and governing body have successfully maintained the high quality of education and outcomes reported in the last inspection, and brought about further improvement, particularly to the curriculum. The continued excellent leadership and management ensure that the school's aims of 'excellence, compassion and enthusiasm' are real to all pupils. The headteacher, aided by a supportive and close-knit staff, fosters high levels of teamwork, which motivates the whole school community. The staff willingly take on new responsibilities. One example is the development of a virtual 'learning platform' to enable parents and pupils to have greater access to information about the school and their children. New initiatives like this are combined skilfully with some more traditional approaches to ensure that key basic skills are still taught well. The continuous urge to do well embodies the school's drive to achieve equal opportunities for all. Its conspicuous care for pupils is demonstrated in its comprehensive arrangements for ensuring pupils' safety, including the use of new technologies, and their well-being.

The school scrutinises its performance very carefully. Minor weaknesses noted in science last year were analysed and the findings used to ensure that the school continues to meet its challenging targets for this subject. Senior managers regularly observe teaching and devise priorities for colleagues' improvement. All those working at the school want to improve. This collective support ensures children gain

maximum benefit from being in school. Key priorities, such as improving the outside area for the Early Years Foundation Stage, are already in the pipeline for improvement.

The governors provide high quality support and have just reviewed their practices to make sure that they continue to keep their 'finger on the pulse' of the school's activities. Their ongoing challenge has helped ensure the school meets its school development priorities. Improvements to the curriculum, and provision of new computers, for example, reflect the school's excellent capacity to maintain its continuing effectiveness. The very strong partnerships with parents reflect those with the local and wider communities. Well-developed links with schools locally, regionally and globally reflect the school's commitment at promoting community cohesion. A recent self-review and inspection evidence confirmed the school's success in raising this aspect of its work to a very high level.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in communicating ambition and driving improvement	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Early Years Foundation Stage

A good start in Reception ensures children are well prepared for Year 1 and beyond. Progress is good in all areas of learning, with the exception of creative development, where progress is satisfactory. By the end of the Reception Year, children generally reach above average standards. Some are on track to achieve extremely well in their social, emotional and physical development, as well as their writing and reading. The 'Mums army' that regularly helps children read is a boon in this respect.

The school ensures that children's start to school is as smooth as possible. Good links with their parents ensure children's emotional and welfare needs are pinpointed right from the start. Children benefit from the high levels of 'hands on' activities, such as disassembling old video recorders to programming their 'beebot' computer toy. These interesting activities help them to develop their independence, while also ensuring that they build up confident basic skills in number, writing and reading. Children enjoy choosing their activities and there is a good balance of activities chosen by the teacher and those selected by the children. Although the outside areas

have some interesting resources, there is not yet enough equipment to foster the children's more creative talents and imaginative play. A lack of cover also means that not enough activities can take place outside in all weathers. The school has plans in place to improve these facilities and extend the expertise of staff and helpers in fostering children's creative development. The provision is managed well.

Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management in the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	2

Views of parents and carers

The vast majority of parents are positive about the school. The positive views covered:

- the way the school cares for their children
- some specific instances where children are well supported through emotional or medical difficulties
- the professional approach of the staff
- the overall standard of education provided.

A small number of parents expressed the view that there were:

- too few playground and sporting facilities
- infrequent updates about what pupils are doing in school and the progress they make
- some specific incidents where the pupils' behaviour was a concern.

The inspection team found that the pupils' behaviour was excellent, although the school admits that some individuals have 'let the side down' on occasions. The school is seeking to extend access to information about the school and pupils' progress. There is already valuable information provided for parents through monthly news letters and 'online' information. A new online 'learning platform', planned to start soon, is designed to enable quicker access to information about pupils' progress. Meetings to discuss progress are also held regularly during the year, but it is not possible to say how well these are conducted. Sporting and playground activities are hindered to some extent by a lack of a sports field and the two playgrounds are compact. However, the school uses the local sports field when possible, and the playground space appeared adequate for the sports coaching and playtime activities seen during the inspection.

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Groombridge St Thomas to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school. If a parent has more than one child at the school, we ask them to record an answer against all the questions for each of their children.

The inspectors received 45 completed questionnaires. In total, there are 269 parents and carers registered at the school.

	Always	Most of the time	Occasionally	Never
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	33	14	0	0

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. In 2007-8, 15% of schools were judged to be outstanding.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well. In 2007-8, 49% of schools were judged good.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils. In 2007-8, 32% of schools were judged satisfactory.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves. In 2007-8, 5% of schools were judged inadequate.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, training or development. This may refer to the acquisition of skills, knowledge, understanding or desired attributes. Attributes include qualities or personal competencies which are important to the development of the pupil; for example personal, social, cultural, emotional or health.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.



21 May 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Groombridge St Thomas' CE Aided Primary School, Tunbridge Wells TN3 9SF

We liked visiting your school recently. Thank you for telling us what you thought. Yours is an outstanding school that is always working to be even better. Here are some of the things that we found to be particularly good.

- You make excellent progress in your work and reach high standards by the time you leave in Year 6.
- You all really enjoy being at the school and think the staff are excellent.
- You behave really well in class and around the school.
- The activities planned in lessons, along with extra help for those of you who need it, ensure that you make excellent progress.
- Children in the Reception class have a happy start to school, and learn well in most areas they cover.
- You know that getting exercise, drinking water and eating certain foods are good for you.
- You said you feel extremely safe and all the adults know you well because they keep a very close eye on how well you are doing.
- Your mini-enterprise work is really good, and well done for raising lots of money.
- Teaching is high quality and teachers make most lessons exciting.
- Your new computer work is excellent, and you do great work in other subjects too, such as art, music, history and design and technology.
- All your staff and governors lead the school extremely well.

There is just one thing we have asked the school to do to help improve it some more.

- Improve the outside area for reception children so they have even more exciting and enjoyable resources to use and enjoy.

You can help your teachers by continuing to work hard and being well behaved and kind to your friends, so that your school can be even better.

Yours faithfully

Kevin Hodge
Lead inspector

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