

Whitehill Junior School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117253
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326555
Inspection date	29 April 2009
Reporting inspector	Roderick Passant

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

Type of school	Junior
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	7–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	191
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Paul Clark
Headteacher	Mrs Fran Bradshaw
Date of previous school inspection	28 March 2006
School address	Whitehill Road Hitchin Hertfordshire SG4 9HT
Telephone number	01462 621313
Fax number	01462 621311

Age group	7–11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector. The inspector evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues:

- what lesson observations and school data indicated about pupils' current attainment and progress;
- the school's leadership and management's effectiveness in improving various aspects of its provision;
- the provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Evidence was drawn from the school's self evaluation, lesson observations, school documentation, discussions with members of the senior leadership team, a parent governor, two parents, the 'extended school' organiser, conversation with the headteacher of the feeder infant school, school pupils and the analysis of parents' questionnaires. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the inspector found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

This junior school is average in size and is situated on the eastern edge of Hitchin. Two thirds of its pupils come from the immediate area. Most pupils attend the local infant school. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is well below average. A quarter of pupils are drawn from a variety of ethnic heritages. A very small number of pupils are at an early stage of learning English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils who have difficulty with their learning is broadly average. There are no pupils with statements detailing their educational needs. The school serves a mixed community of social and private housing, part of which has higher than average social and economic deprivation. The area is one of high mobility. A significant proportion of pupils joins or leaves the school, mainly in Years 5 and 6. The school has gained a number of awards for its curriculum work in fostering the arts, information and communication technology (ICT), physical education and sports, as well as for its work in promoting health awareness and development of positive attitudes to innovation and managing risk. Attainment on entry as reflected in Year 2 assessments is generally above average.

The Playgroup is run on the school site and not managed by the governing body. This was inspected separately.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

A parent wrote. 'I drop my daughter at Whitehill every morning confident in the knowledge that she will be safe, nurtured and receiving the very best in all aspects of her education. Whitehill is an excellent school.' This succinctly sums up the strengths of this outstanding school. The school very effectively provides the conditions in which pupils can flourish so that they develop extremely well and attain standards that are generally significantly above average. The local community rightly holds the school in high regard. Most of the parent inspection questionnaires were supportive and many parents took the trouble to write brief positive comments about the school.

The school has continued to make significant improvements over a range of aspects of its work since the last inspection when it was judged 'good with outstanding features'. This demonstrates both the excellence of the school's and governors' leadership and management - which are ambitious for the school and its pupils and therefore constantly seeking improvement - and its ability to refine and develop the school. The headteacher continues to lead the school extremely well. She is passionate about learning and ensuring that the school provides the best possible conditions in which pupils can thrive within a highly inclusive and cohesive community. She has established a very strong team of staff who share core values and are therefore consistent in their approach. There is a strong sense of professionalism, openness to new ideas and preparedness to share skills. Excellent management systems underpin the school's ability to analyse rigorously where further development is required, and articulate that in a clear development plan to which all staff contribute through their various leadership roles. This plan would be even better if the success criteria of the various initiatives were even more sharply defined so that staff are absolutely clear about the impact of the initiative on pupils' learning and can determine when desired goals have been attained. Although the school is extremely busy, staff are reflective and think carefully about how to approach their work.

The school manages well the significant proportion of pupils who join the school late in their primary career. This is because it is particularly warm and friendly community and staff work sensitively to ensure that newcomers are quickly absorbed into it and the ethos of high achievement that it promotes. The school provides very wide ranging opportunities for pupils to achieve success outside and inside the classroom through the vibrant nature of its curriculum. The school takes every advantage to take part in specific events, such as the local dance festival or tag rugby tournament. Participation is not limited to the talented but opened up to those pupils willing to commit themselves.

Because pupils have many opportunities to gain success, they gain confidence. This is evident within classrooms. For example, a pupil carefully explained the relative merits of primary and secondary historical source material whilst in another lesson, pupils enthusiastically expressed their ideas about a suitcase of artefacts and the insights they suggested to the poem *The Highwayman*. Pupils develop a mature appreciation of other pupils' talents and skills because they are secure in their own. One pupil described being good at something as a 'privilege'. Pupils can talk openly about the National Curriculum level that they have attained and their target grades, confident that their peers will not sneer at them. Academic success and achievement are fostered in this school through the richness of the learning experiences. A parent wrote, 'Whitehill shows a broader, more global perspective to education, thus making it a very special school.'

Pupils are extremely proud of their school. They describe learning as fun and say that lessons are interesting, a judgement confirmed by the inspection. Teaching is good and often outstanding; teachers are skilled practitioners and consistent high quality learning is the result. There is strong mutual respect. Staff listen carefully to pupils in class and find many ways, such as assemblies, to value and recognise pupils' contributions. The very positive ethos occurs because staff are skilled at building on pupils' motivation and helping pupils to see themselves as active partners in the learning process. As a parent pointed out 'children are encouraged to challenge ideas, take risks [in their work] and become confident and independent learners.'

Topics catch pupils' interest, are underpinned by careful planning and creative flair and link subjects together in a meaningful way. Lessons are often active with extensive opportunities for pupils to express their ideas. There is good teamwork between the adults in classrooms. Marking is supportive but indicates how to improve. Since the last inspection, there has been a sustained and successful focus on ensuring that teachers challenge higher attaining pupils. In addition, all teachers are participating in a peer-coaching programme to enhance their skills. Care guidance and support are excellent. A parent spoke of her immense relief at the way her son, who has particular needs, had settled into the school and flourished after a poor experience in several schools in another part of the country. There are strong links with the feeder infant school, and a genuine sense that Whitehill is building on the foundation laid there, and that both schools are working together to ensure smooth transfer and progression through pupils' primary experiences. Links with the secondary schools provide pupils with further extension opportunities. Links with specialist agencies are also very strong.

The result of this high quality of provision is that the school helps pupils develop personally extremely well. Year 6 pupils are mature, confident and articulate. Above all, they enjoy school and learning and this is reflected in their high attendance. Behaviour is excellent because staff are consistent in their expectations and manage behaviour in a positive fashion. The result is that most pupils behave extremely well for most of the time and their demeanour in classrooms creates the very positive ethos. Pupils feel extremely safe. They report little if any bullying but were confident that they, the pupil 'guardian angels', or a member of staff would sort out any problems. All pupils spoken to were confident about approaching an adult if they had difficulties. Pupils have an extremely good understanding of what makes a healthy lifestyle and how to manage risks, including internet safety. They take their responsibilities very seriously and make an excellent contribution to the community. A pupil talked about the privilege of being able to represent the school in various activities and this genuine shared pride in the school is an additional bonding agent that helps forge the strong Whitehill community.

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. Pupils have a mature respect for others developed through the international dimension to the curriculum and the work on other faiths. Along with their work in the arts, this ensures that their cultural development is excellent. Their social development is excellent because the school provides wide ranging opportunities for them to work together in groups and teams, to act as 'ambassadors' and through the residential experiences. Pupil reported that they draw their friends from across the year groups. The school fosters their self-esteem particularly well and there are excellent opportunities within the curriculum to reflect on and empathise with the lives of other people. Pupils develop a strong sense of right and wrong.

Current Year 6 pupils are on track to meet their challenging targets. Standards in the core subjects are generally above average and show improvement since the last inspection. Pupils display a high degree of competence in ICT and other subjects. Because of the long-standing issues of mobility, the school has established a rigorous system to establish a baseline and

monitor pupils' progress using a variety of assessment tools including using age appropriate assessment tests. Regular staff team meetings identify early those pupils who for one reason or another may be having difficulties; staff are therefore able to put in place a variety of support strategies. The result is that pupils make at least good progress against their Year 2 assessments and many pupils make excellent progress, particularly those who have been in school for the full four years. Pupils who have learning difficulties make excellent progress, aided by the fact that the special educational needs co-ordinator is a joint appointment with the infant school and works across both sites. Although the numbers learning English as an additional language are low, because of the quality of support that they receive, they usually develop initial fluency quickly. Given pupils' above average core skills, competence in ICT, their confident articulate manner, extremely positive attitudes to learning, and opportunities to take responsibility and show initiative, the school provides an excellent foundation for their future economic well-being and the next steps in their education.

What the school should do to improve further

- Define with greater precision, and where appropriate quantify, the success criteria relating to initiatives in the school improvement plan so that the school is very clear about what impact the initiatives will have and when this point is reached.

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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

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	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	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?	1
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?	1
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**

30 April 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Whitehill Junior School, Hitchin, SG4 9HT

Thank you for making me so welcome in your school. I enjoyed my day very much. I hope Years 3 and 4 had a very exciting and useful time at the science museum. My particular thanks go to those pupils who gave up so much of their lunchtime to talk to me. What you had to say was thoughtful and particularly helpful.

You are justly proud of your school. It is an outstanding school which is helping you to develop as young people exceptionally well. You told me that you feel very safe in school and that if you had a problem you were confident to approach an adult. You were confident that any issues would be sorted either by yourselves, the 'guardian angels' or a member of staff. You clearly understand what goes to make a healthy lifestyle and how to manage risks. You make an excellent contribution to the school community and take your many responsibilities very seriously. Above all you enjoy school a very great deal. You told me that learning was fun and that teachers make lessons interesting. I agree with you. Teachers are very skilled and looking at the range of the work you do and the opportunities you have in and out of lessons I can see why you have so very positive attitudes to learning. In one or two of the lessons I was very tempted to join in. I, too, remember reading *The Highwayman* when I was your age and the impact it had on me. Staff care about you a great deal. I was impressed with your mature attitudes and the obvious respect you have for other people. You help make Whitehill a very strong and friendly community and you clearly welcome those pupils who join the school and help settle them in quickly. Because the school gives you such wide-ranging opportunities to achieve success, be it in lessons, music performance or on the sports field, it helps you develop in confidence and I saw this in the way you confidently expressed your ideas at length in lessons.

Academically you make at least good progress and many of you make really good progress in your work. Standards are generally above those you see in many schools. Year 6 are on track to reach their targets. Well done. The school has made many improvements since the last inspection. Mrs Bradshaw leads the school extremely well. All staff work together as a team extremely well and are continually looking at ways to improve the school. I asked Mrs Bradshaw to ensure that staff in their plans for improving the school made it very clear how they were going to judge the success of their plans so that knew when they had achieved them.

I am sure you will do well in the future because the school is preparing you so very well for the next steps in your education.

Sincere good wishes to you all in your future school careers.

Roderick Passant

Lead Inspector