

The Acorns

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	134866
Local Authority	Cheshire
Inspection number	328990
Inspection dates	2–3 October 2008
Reporting inspector	Kevin Johnson

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	Primary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	303
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	Mr M Nield
Headteacher	Mrs A Powell
Date of previous school inspection	26 September 2005
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Pooltown Road Ellesmere Port Cheshire CH65 7ED
Telephone number	0151 355 1546
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Age group	3–11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This is a larger than average sized school serving an area in which there is a high level of social need. The number of pupils eligible for a free school meal is well above average. Almost all pupils are from White British backgrounds. An above average proportion of pupils have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. This includes those receiving specially resourced provision to support their complex and moderate learning difficulties. The school operates on a split site with infants and juniors in separate buildings. The Acorns is a Dyslexia Friendly school. It has achieved Healthy School status and holds the Activemark and Inclusion Kitemark.

Extended provision is available for pupils before and after school. That provision was inspected separately, at the same time as the school inspection, and receives a separately written report.

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 with outstanding features. Strong leadership has brought about good improvements in standards and in the quality of teaching. The exceptional care provided is reflected in pupils' outstanding personal development.

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is exceptional because care for others and responsibility are at the heart of what the school teaches. Pupils are extremely polite and well mannered. They are very mindful of one another and have a mature sense of 'fair play', as demonstrated by the occasional but successful interventions of playground buddies. Pupils' links with schools in France and Uganda add greatly to their cultural understanding gained from lessons and visitors to school. Pupils' behaviour is outstanding, particularly in the way they are attentive in lessons and adapt very sensibly to different situations, such as when they are in the dining room or during assemblies. Although the attendance of a small minority of pupils is below the national average, there has been good and continued improvement, so that the large majority of pupils are punctual and attend regularly. Pupils really enjoy school because, they say, 'the teachers are great and make our lessons fun'. They enjoy immensely art and musical performances and are equally appreciative of the activities provided for them after school, especially sports. Pupils are extremely proud of their Healthy School achievements. Because of the watchfulness of the school council, all pupils are conscious of what a sensible diet is and of how the school's vegetable plot can contribute to it. Pupils' mature and caring attitudes mean that they take on additional responsibilities very conscientiously. 'I like being on the school council because I can help people', is a view shared genuinely among council members. Others accept caring roles in the playground or ensure that healthy snacks are available during morning break. Pupils' important life skills are developed further, for example, through their work with local schools and both national and neighbourhood businesses. As a result, by the time they leave, pupils are well prepared to be active members of a community and are more than ready to move on the next stage of their education.

Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) enter the school with skills below those expected for their age and make satisfactory progress. Progress is good in Key Stages 1 and 2 because of teachers' improved use of assessment to plan lessons and to set targets. As a result, pupils achieve well by the time they leave the school. Standards at both key stages have improved recently and, overall, are broadly average. Teachers' assessments for 2008 show good improvement in reading and mathematics at the end of Year 2, but there is still more ground to be made up in writing, especially for the more able pupils. The provisional results of the Year 6 national tests indicate a significant improvement in standards in English, mathematics and science. Pupils performed particularly well in mathematics and science. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities benefit very well from the support given by highly skilled staff. Excellent planning and use of resources helps pupils overcome many of their difficulties and enables them to make good progress towards their individual targets.

The overall quality of teaching and learning is good, with some outstanding practice. Teachers share their subject knowledge and skills well to make lessons lively and challenging for pupils. Work is matched closely to pupils' varying needs, which enables them to progress well.

The curriculum is good. It promotes pupils' personal development and enjoyment exceptionally well and contributes significantly to their good achievement. The range and quality of additional experiences to enrich pupils' learning are very strong features of provision.

Good leadership and management have improved the quality of teaching, which has resulted in pupils' good progress and rising standards. The headteacher and senior leadership team work tirelessly to check on the school's performance. This gives them the insight needed to provide the training and support, which effectively enables teachers and teaching assistants to fulfil their roles successfully. The challenging targets set for pupils in Year 6 in 2008 were exceeded and the school has raised its sights by setting even higher goals for the future. The headteacher's inclusive leadership means that all staff members contribute well to school improvement and share in the school's accurate self-evaluation. Governors have a good knowledge of the school. They both challenge and support its performance and have contributed well to its improvement since the previous inspection. Finances are managed efficiently to ensure good value for money. Given the current strengths in leadership and pupils' progress, the school demonstrates good capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 3

Provision for children in EYFS is satisfactory overall with some good features. Children's knowledge and skills are below those expected for their age when they start in the Nursery. Throughout Nursery and Reception, they make satisfactory progress in most areas of their learning so that most children are working within the early learning goals by the end of their Reception year. Provision for children's welfare is good. Their introduction to EYFS is managed well. Children are given a warm and friendly welcome and good relationships are developed with parents and carers. Children are well cared for. Days start calmly and children settle quickly to classroom routines. Children's personal development is encouraged effectively. There are times for children to share their news, for example, or to celebrate birthdays. They make choices about what they want to do so that they gain some independence and learn to play alongside others. Teachers' plans for daily sessions of 'letters and sounds' are well focused and the steady progress that children make helps them to tackle early stages of reading and writing confidently. Although outdoor activities are planned, provision is fragmented. This inhibits opportunities for children to develop and build on what they learn in the classroom through outdoor play. Some of the indoor activities that children choose for themselves do not have real purpose and do not promote fully their independent learning and development. Overall, provision is managed satisfactorily. Strong teamwork means that all EYFS staff share in the assessment of children's progress.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve provision for children's independent learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- Raise standards in writing at the end of Year 2.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

After a satisfactory start, progress picks up in Key Stages 1 and 2, resulting in good achievement by the end of Year 6. Teachers' assessments and provisional national test data for 2008 indicate good improvement in standards at the end of both key stages. At the end of Year 2, standards in reading were well below average in 2007, but latest assessments show them to be broadly average. Standards in mathematics have risen significantly and are currently average. Despite showing a slight improvement, standards in writing remain below expectations. Inspection

evidence indicates that standards at the end of Year 6 are average overall and show good improvement in English, mathematics and science.

Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make very good progress. Those who join the school in order to benefit from the special provision have their needs assessed very quickly. Pupils help to map out their own individual education plans and record the progress they make, so that they always know what their next challenge is to be.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils enjoy school enormously and are extremely proud of it. They show genuine care and concern for each other. Their relationships with others, attitudes to work and their behaviour are outstanding. Pupils are very appreciative of what adults in school do for them, such as in the classroom, those extra things such as the residential visit, clubs and before and after school provision. Pupils maintain very strongly that there is no bullying and that playtimes are fun. Some are trained as playground buddies and take on a pastoral role by ensuring everyone has the chance to be active and involved. Pupils are fully aware of what it means to have a healthy lifestyle. They are thoughtful about their choices of food at break and lunchtimes. An increasing number of pupils follow the school's travel plan and cycle to school. Pupils' involvement in the life of the school and the local community is outstanding. The school council has initiated some successful changes, which include giving professional development tips to teachers. Pupils are active in the wider community, by planning their own fundraising to help charities, visiting the elderly and giving musical performances. The use of their local secondary school as the venue for their successful performance of High School Musical gave pupils' confidence a significant boost and was excellent preparation for their move to the next phase of their education.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning have improved since the previous inspection. Well planned professional development, together with rigorous checks on quality and positive support have established a skilled teaching team. Expectations have been raised. Consequently, pupils achieve well. Teachers use a good variety of methods and resources to bring lessons to life. Particularly effective use is made of interactive whiteboards to involve pupils in their learning and keep them on their toes. Lessons usually get off to a lively start. For example, a lesson on letter sounds began with an 'aerobics' session, in which sounds were repeated to a mixture of movement and musical rhythm. This helped pupils to absorb their knowledge of sounds through different senses so that they remembered them well and used them correctly in a subsequent spelling task. Teachers generally plan well for pupils' different abilities because they use assessment information effectively to pitch work at the right level. Occasionally, in literacy lessons, for example, more able pupils spend longer than necessary consolidating skills such as sentence construction, rather than moving on to the more challenging task of applying this to their writing. Relationships are an excellent feature of lessons. Pupils know teachers value the contribution they make. This raises their self-esteem and enjoyment of learning and encourages pupils to work hard. Teaching assistants are a valuable part of the teaching team. They are very sensitive to pupils' particular needs and their skilful support contributes well to pupils' learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum challenges pupils and helps them to achieve well. The introduction of French has given additional breadth and promotes pupils' cultural awareness by encouraging links with a school in Grenoble. There is a good emphasis on literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT), and pupils enjoy applying these skills in a variety of ways across subjects. Enrichment through after school clubs, visits and visitors to school is a very strong feature and an important contribution to pupils' enjoyment. Provision for pupils' personal, health, social and citizenship education is well established. Outside agencies are used effectively to raise pupils' awareness of the dangers surrounding drugs and other substances and of the importance of secure relationships.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Parents overwhelmingly agree that their children could not be better cared for in school. Pupils confirm this view. They say there is always someone to look after them whenever they need help and that they share trusting relationships with adults who work in the school. Care and support for the most vulnerable pupils and, at times their families, is outstanding. Learning mentors work closely with pupils and their families and the impact of their work in improving attendance is impressive. Sensitive counselling is available to pupils who have emotional difficulties and this helps them to access their learning more easily. Support for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is excellent. The school sets clear expectations for pupils' conduct and personal safety. All safeguarding requirements are in place. The school has highly effective systems to track pupils' academic progress and to help them to meet their targets. Through their effective marking, teachers highlight how well pupils have learnt and point out what they need to learn next.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

School leaders set clear direction for improvement and provide outstanding care for pupils. The headteacher's vision and drive has ensured managers' skills have improved as a result of effective work with education improvement partners and other providers. She has established a highly motivated staff team, all of whom equally share accountability for raising standards and improving quality. Rigorous academic targets are set and the school is doing all that it can to ensure its challenging attendance target is achieved. The school's inclusiveness is reflected in the care it provides for all pupils and in its good progress in promoting community cohesion. Governors have a good overview of the school's work. They support the school well and work hard to maintain its good reputation within the community.

Since the previous inspection, there has been significant improvement in many aspects of the school's work. The exception is in the EYFS where provision remains satisfactory. All previous issues have been dealt with. Standards and achievement have seen a steady rise and there has been good improvement in teaching quality and the impact of leadership and management, particularly in Key Stages 1 and 2. Overall, this is a more effective school than at the time of the previous inspection.

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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

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	3
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	3
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	2
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	3
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	2
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
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	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	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?	2
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?	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**

On behalf of the team, may I thank you very much for the warm and friendly welcome you gave us when we inspected your school recently. We really enjoyed talking with you and were delighted to find that you enjoy school so much. Your behaviour is excellent and you are exceptionally polite and well mannered. The grown-ups in school provide excellent care for you and you are just as good at taking care of each other.

The Acorns is a good school with some outstanding things about it. The standards you reach in your work are improving, but your standards in writing at the end of Year 2 should be better. Even so, by the time you leave the school you achieve well. This is because of the good work your teachers do, and the fact that you enjoy lessons and work hard. Your headteacher runs the school well and is determined to make it even better. You can help by continuing to work hard and being really helpful.

We have asked your headteacher and governors to make two improvements. The first is to help children in the Nursery and Reception to get off to a better start by giving them more chances to learn on their own, especially by playing outdoors. We have also asked your headteacher to help pupils in Year 2 to reach higher standards in writing.