

Mill Vale School, Dunstable

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109663
Local Authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	337346
Inspection dates	6–7 May 2010
Reporting inspector	David Gosling

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

Type of school	Middle deemed secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	9–13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	434
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Nigel Hodgson
Headteacher	Gill Ellyard (acting)
Date of previous school inspection	21 March 2007
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by three additional inspectors. The inspectors observed 27 lessons and 24 teachers. An additional nine lessons were visited briefly as part of a focus on behaviour and to assess the pace of learning. Inspectors held meetings with staff, governors and pupils and spoke to a representative from the local authority. They observed the school's work, and looked at pupils' books, the school development plan, data on pupils' progress and other documentation. They analysed 82 questionnaires completed by parents, 194 from pupils and 20 from staff.

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

- learning and progress, especially in English and for higher ability pupils
- recent improvements and the school's capacity to sustain improvement
- whether teaching and the use of assessment had improved since the last inspection
- behaviour, including the approach to tackling any bullying.

Information about the school

Mill Vale Middle School is smaller than most secondary schools and situated in a residential area in Dunstable. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is well below the national average. The large majority of pupils are of White British heritage with a few from Asian backgrounds. A below average proportion of pupils has special educational needs and/or disabilities. The acting headteacher has been appointed to the substantive post, effective from September 2010.

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

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

4

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

3

Main findings

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could reasonably be expected to perform. The school is therefore given a notice to improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to pupils' progress, improving the pace of recent improvements, the promotion of equal opportunities and community cohesion, and safeguarding arrangements.

The effectiveness of leadership and management in improving the school since the last inspection has been inadequate. Over a three year period there has been significant underachievement in Years 5 and 6; too much teaching remains satisfactory. The role of, and support for, heads of department are still undeveloped, with a lack of consistency in the quality of their planning and evaluation.

The school's capacity to improve is satisfactory. Since January 2010, when the acting headteacher was appointed, there have been significant improvements. A whole school audit has been undertaken; weaknesses in behaviour are being addressed well; monitoring of teaching and pupils' progress are more robust; the staffing structure has been revised and improved; and a rigorous weekly training programme for staff has been established.

Pupils make the strongest progress in Years 7 and 8, but throughout the school the pace of learning is too slow. The most able pupils and those who are gifted and talented, in particular, are not given enough challenge in their work. Progress in English, a weakness in the last inspection, is improving but weaknesses in boys' writing have not been addressed. Teachers are not using assessments well enough to target work for individuals and groups of pupils. The curriculum does not engage pupils enough in lessons. Consequently, they show limited enthusiasm for their work.

Pupils feel safe in the school and their behaviour is satisfactory. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory, with social development the weakest area, partly because the skills needed to work as a team member are not being developed. In recent years, the school has shown insufficient drive in developing its work in key areas. This has led to inadequate promotion of equal opportunities and community cohesion and gaps in the school's safeguarding arrangements.

The value for money provided by the school is inadequate because the progress pupils make is insufficient and, although currently being addressed, there is a projected financial deficit this year.

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What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the rate of pupils' learning and progress by:
 - maintaining an unrelenting drive to raise attainment in Years 5 and 6, particularly in boys' writing
 - increasing the level of challenge in lessons for higher ability and gifted and talented pupils.
- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching by:
 - ensuring that by the end of July, all teachers use assessments to plan activities which build on what pupils have already achieved
 - developing strategies for increasing pupils' engagement in lessons.
- Develop the role of head of department by:
 - setting, within the next two months, much clearer and higher expectations of middle managers, especially for planning, monitoring and evaluation
 - creating a more relevant and exciting curriculum for their subjects.
- Develop a more systematic and committed approach to promoting equality of opportunity and community cohesion and ensure national requirements are met.
- Ensure, within a month, that arrangements for safeguarding are robust and meet statutory requirements.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**4**

Although pupils attain in line with national expectations, their learning and progress are inadequate. In lessons, too many pupils are very passive. Boys' writing is a weakness, especially basic spelling and punctuation. Despite this, work in English books show satisfactory progress this year, with pupils gaining a good grasp of some challenging texts and growing skills in a range of styles. In mathematics and science lessons progress is uneven and over the past three years it has been inadequate in Years 5 and 6. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress as a result of well-targeted support in and out of lessons.

Attendance is above average and pupils are punctual. The school is orderly, with little bullying and the large majority of pupils feel safe. Only a small minority of pupils who completed the questionnaire thought behaviour was good. Unsatisfactory behaviour in some lessons usually takes the form of a lack of focus, partly because the lesson and the curriculum are not sufficiently engaging. One pupil wrote she wanted 'more fun' in her lessons. Pupils take on a range of responsibilities in the school and are involved in some community activities. They have basic literacy, numeracy, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills but have not sufficiently developed group work skills because teachers do not provide enough opportunities for pupils to discuss and problem-solve.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

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Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	4
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	4
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	3
The extent to which pupils feel safe	3
Pupils' behaviour	3
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	3
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3

How effective is the provision?

Although teaching is satisfactory, it varies in quality, with none outstanding and a small minority that is inadequate. Teachers have some good generic teaching skills but the pace of learning is too slow in some lessons. The majority of lessons provide a reasonable range of activities, although a small minority are too highly structured resulting in little space for pupils to explore and reflect on their learning. Teachers have secure subject knowledge and good relationships with pupils. The main weakness of teaching is insufficient drive to raise attainment, especially of the higher ability and gifted and talented pupils. Teachers have good data on pupils' attainment and progress but they are not using it well enough to build on what pupils have already achieved. The teaching of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is satisfactory because of some skilful work by teaching assistants.

The curriculum meets statutory requirements and the school is developing good provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The opportunities presented by the new Key Stage 3 curriculum for developing more interesting and relevant lessons have not been exploited. There is satisfactory provision for out-of-school clubs and visits.

Most parents think that the school meets their child's individual needs. The special educational needs coordinator has a good knowledge of potentially vulnerable pupils and has developed a clear and comprehensive plan of support for them. Recently introduced

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

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systems for improving behaviour are very thorough and require an appropriate corporate effort by all teachers. There is little provision for careers education or the development of enterprise skills.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	4
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	3
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	3

How effective are leadership and management?

Serious weaknesses in the school's leadership have been identified by the local authority and, as a result, rigorous improvement strategies have recently been put in place. These have led to some rapid improvements on a range of fronts and the foundations of a successful school are being laid. This was a theme running through parents' comments. One parent talked of 'great improvements', and another wrote, 'all is in hand and getting better'.

The school's self-evaluation, written in October 2009, does not identify accurately the schools' weaknesses, for example, poor progress made by pupils in Years 5 and 6. It lacks clarity. However, monitoring and evaluation of the school's work have improved considerably since then. The new school development plan contains a range of robust actions to raise attainment and improve teaching, with clear and ambitious targets. It is being monitored closely by the acting headteacher, the governing body and the local authority. The role of middle leaders, a weakness at the previous inspection, is improving but the quality of their evaluations and improvement planning is variable because the school does not set clear expectations of their role.

Supported by the local authority, governors have developed their roles in the past year. The governing body monitors the school's progress in implementing priorities and holds senior leaders more closely to account. Governors have a very clear grasp of the school's strengths and weaknesses, except in safeguarding arrangements which they are not monitoring with enough rigour. These are inadequate because the child protection designated officer has not attended key training in new requirements and there are important gaps in the Child Protection policy. Equal opportunities, especially gender equality, have not been promoted and evaluated sufficiently. Similarly, there has been no drive to promote community cohesion, with little analysis of local communities, no systematic planning and no evaluation of the impact of any work undertaken. The school is beginning to work productively with successful schools in the area and with the local authority. Good partnerships are in place to develop out-of-school activities. The school has a positive relationship with parents but they have not been involved enough

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in whole school decisions.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	4
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	4
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	3
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	3
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	3
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	4
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	4
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	4
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	4

Views of parents and carers

Most parents who returned questionnaires have positive views of the education provided and the large majority are happy with the progress their children make. Inspectors found the school to be improving rapidly but that learning and progress are inadequate and teaching is only satisfactory. A small minority of parents are unhappy with the way behaviour is dealt with but inspectors found the new behaviour management systems to be good. Inspectors agree with the small minority of parents who think that the school does not take enough account of their views in making decisions.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Mill Vale School, Dunstable to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 82 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 434 pupils registered at the school. Not all parents responded to every question.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	26	32	49	60	5	6	1	1
The school keeps my child safe	26	32	46	56	9	11	1	1
The school informs me about my child's progress	13	16	49	60	16	20	1	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	15	18	48	59	12	15	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	7	9	63	77	7	9	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	12	15	46	56	18	22	1	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	9	11	61	74	9	11	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	11	13	54	66	7	9	2	2
The school meets my child's particular needs	10	12	57	70	9	11	1	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	11	13	42	51	19	23	7	9
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	3	4	51	62	21	26	1	1
The school is led and managed effectively	6	7	51	62	14	17	1	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	18	22	48	59	13	16	1	1

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
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.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	51	45	0	4
Primary schools	6	41	42	10
Secondary schools	8	34	44	14
Sixth forms	10	37	50	3
Special schools	32	38	25	5
Pupil referral units	12	43	31	14
All schools	9	40	40	10

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above is for the period 1 September to 31 December 2009 and is the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn term 2009 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
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.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



Monday 10 May 2010

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Mill Vale School, Dunstable, LU5 4QP

Thank you very much for the welcome you gave us when we inspected your school. We are especially grateful to those of you who took time to talk to us about your work and tell us your views about the school. We found that there has not been enough improvement over the past three years so we have given the school a 'notice to improve'. This means the school will get extra help to improve quickly and will be visited again by inspectors to check on how well it is dealing with its priorities.

These are our main findings and areas for improvement:

- the progress you are making has not been good enough in recent years, especially in Years 5 and 6 and in English
- teaching is satisfactory but teachers need to make sure that all of you make good progress in lessons and that they use assessment information more carefully to plan activities for you
- heads of department need to improve the quality of lesson planning in order to make lessons more interesting, and check carefully on how well their departments are performing
- the school needs to do more to promote equal opportunities and to work more closely with different groups in the community
- although you feel safe, arrangements for safety need to be tightened up, especially the training of teachers responsible for safeguarding
- the school has made some big improvements since January, with the arrival of the new acting headteacher.

You can help the school by working hard and trying to become more involved in lessons. Your attendance is good and you need to keep this up.

Yours sincerely

David Gosling

Lead inspector

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