

Ashmead Combined School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110356
Local Authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	337475
Inspection dates	3–4 February 2010
Reporting inspector	Rob Crompton

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	493
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Roger Axtell
Headteacher	Marcus Pickover
Date of previous school inspection	4 February 2010
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by four additional inspectors. The inspectors spent about two thirds of their time looking at learning. They observed 20 teachers in 25 lessons, and held meetings with governors, staff and groups of pupils. They observed the school's work, and looked at pupils' work, assessment records, lesson plans, minutes of governors' meetings and the 149 questionnaires returned by parents.

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

- pupils' progress in English across the school
- the extent to which boys and girls were progressing at similar rates
- the effectiveness of leadership and management in raising standards.

Information about the school

Ashmead is a large primary school serving an estate on the outskirts of Aylesbury. Pupils come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, with almost a third being of Asian heritage. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average. Most of these pupils have speech, language and communication difficulties, and a few have behavioural or emotional problems. An above average proportion of pupils use English as an additional language. The Early Years Foundation Stage comprises a pre-school unit for Nursery-aged children, funded centrally, and three Reception classes. Following a period when they were acting on a temporary basis, two members of the senior management team were appointed to be joint headteachers in September 2009.

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?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

This good school provides an outstanding curriculum which thoroughly engages pupils and promotes their creativity and thinking skills. The school's success is a reflection of the hard work and inspirational leadership of the joint headteachers. They have the unswerving support of senior managers, staff, governors and pupils. As a result of their combined efforts and of accurate self-evaluation, the pace of learning across the school has accelerated and standards have risen. Weaknesses identified in the last inspection have been addressed tenaciously and successfully. Consequently the school has a good capacity to improve further and build on current strengths.

Children starting school generally have very weak language and number skills. They progress well through the school so that, by the time they leave Year 6, standards are broadly average. All groups are achieving well, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, those who come from different ethnic backgrounds and those who are more able. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are keen to learn, although opportunities for them to initiate activities independently are sometimes constrained by too much adult direction.

Almost all parents and carers who returned questionnaires said they were happy with their children's experience at school. As one wrote, 'My children's self-esteem and academic progress have been high since attending Ashmead.' High levels of support are underpinned by excellent relationships between adults and pupils, which help explain pupils' very positive attitudes to learning and the good progress they are making. Pupils love coming to school and behave very well. Pupils show an admirable tenacity of spirit, and a strong empathy and deep compassion for those less fortunate than themselves. Despite every effort to encourage parents and carers to ensure their children attend regularly and to avoid term-time holidays, a very small minority do not do so. This particularly affects those children who find learning difficult.

Good teaching and highly imaginative approaches engage pupils and stimulate their interest. For example 'finding Noah asleep in his Ark' (a volunteer parent) prompted many listening, speaking and writing activities in Year 1. Boys, who were previously outperformed by girls, are equally keen to write because of a range of successful initiatives to capture their interest. Consequently, the gap between boys' and girls' attainment is narrowing quickly.

The governing body perform their role satisfactorily in challenging the school and holding it to account. Self-evaluation procedures are well established and involve all stakeholders. As a result, strategic planning is well founded. Governors are aware that their use of the increasingly detailed assessment data to sharpen their contribution to

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self-evaluation is at an early stage.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Extend opportunities for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage to develop their independent learning skills. Strengthen the governors' role in self-evaluation by fully embedding the use of assessment data in reviewing the school's performance. ¹ Improve attendance levels by ensuring that a very small minority of parents are fully aware of the impact on their children's achievement of taking holidays during term time.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

Pupils make good headway in developing speaking, listening and reading skills, and increasingly good progress in writing. Some excellent examples of written work were seen, particularly in Years 3 to 6. Younger pupils make good attempts at writing unfamiliar words by sounding them out. As they move up through the school, pupils' spelling becomes more accurate, handwriting skills develop well and most present their work neatly. Good progress in mathematics, again from a low start, is shown by pupils in Year 6, who demonstrate good problem solving skills when working with fractions. They enjoy new challenges. One boy exclaimed, 'That's a problem in itself!' when faced with dividing a doughnut into eight pieces with just three cuts. All groups are achieving well, including those who come from different ethnic backgrounds, those who are more able and those with English as an additional language. Very good support for pupils with speech and language difficulties, involving outside specialists, means they also make good progress.

Pupils' improving progress owes much to their growing confidence and self-esteem. Older pupils work effectively with partners and in small groups. The seeds of this are sown in Years 3 and 4 during 'philosophy for children' lessons, where pupils show a remarkable degree of maturity. Pupils take on a wide range of responsibilities. As members of the school council, prefects and 'befrienders'; they are justifiably proud of their positive impact on school life. Pupils demonstrate an expressive and creative impulse, seen in their artwork and the way they express their feelings. For example, they talked movingly about their personal responses when exploring ideas of friendship and bereavement emerging from the study of *The Iron Man* by Ted Hughes.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

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

How effective is the provision?

Effective teaching is underpinned by teachers' very secure subject knowledge. This enables them to draw on pupils' existing understanding and ask challenging questions that generate a real enthusiasm for learning. The curriculum is another key factor in pupils' enjoyment of school and their achievements. Pupils like the themed approach. 'They make learning fun' and 'They cover all the subjects we do in school' were typical of their comments. One parent's comment, 'I am very pleased with the creative way in which my son is learning', typified many. Modern technology is used well, including the use of film cameras to help pupils reflect on what they have learned during a unit of study. Pupils benefit from good feedback through detailed marking or discussion and gain a clear idea of what they need to do to improve. In some lessons, teaching is less effective when pupils have limited opportunities to take a lead in their own learning. The school has an excellent system to ensure that all areas of the curriculum are covered in a variety of interesting topics. These also incorporate aspects of personal, social and health education in a seamless and inclusive manner. Enrichment activities, including sport, dance and music are enjoyed by many pupils.

All pupils, including the most vulnerable, receive valuable well-targeted support. Teaching assistants, working in tandem with class teachers, support pupils' learning very well, both in lessons and when taking small groups outside the classroom. The positive and caring ethos of the school is built on a foundation of trust and respect for oneself and others, and this culture is embedded at all levels. The school's extremely effective work with pupils and their families, many of whom live in challenging circumstances, helps a very large majority of pupils to make the best of the opportunities provided by

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the school. Every effort is made to dissuade the very small minority of parents who take family holidays in term time to understand the impact on their children's progress. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, including those with emotional or behavioural problems, are quickly identified and receive first-class support from a specialist team of teachers and support staff.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
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?

Many staff, governors and parents remarked on the renewed team spirit across the school since the appointment of the joint headteachers. All concerned are ambitious for the pupils, and leaders at all levels share a determination to ensure they have the best possible start to their education. Through frequent class visits, working alongside colleagues and a sequence of planned observations, senior staff identify good practice and share this with colleagues. The results of such monitoring are not set out in a format that is easily accessible, however. Governors play an increasing part in self-evaluation. They acknowledge that until recently, they did not have enough assessment information to inform their understanding of the school's overall performance. The school's commitment to equal opportunities is clearly evident in its day-to-day life. At every turn, an adult is on hand to encourage pupils to broaden their horizons and believe in themselves. A relentless determination to tackle any inequalities has resulted, for example, in a sharp increase in boys' progress.

All staff are clear about their responsibilities regarding child protection. Detailed confidential records are kept. The co-headteacher who oversees safeguarding devotes a considerable amount of time to this work. He hosts frequent case conferences, involving social service personnel and, where appropriate, police officers.

Positive relationships with parents and carers have been established. School staff and governors make continuous efforts to engage with the wider community. A governor is a member of the local community action group and there are close links with the nearby Healthy Living Centre. Courses on parenting are provided by the school and a kitchen area is nearing completion, with the intention of helping parents to prepare nutritious meals. A large environmental area is under construction for use by the school and the community. As a leading partner in the Creative Partnerships scheme, the school, in partnership with a variety of community groups, is able to provide a wide range of art, music and drama activities that enrich pupils' learning significantly.

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These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
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	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Early Years Foundation Stage

Children from all backgrounds make good progress, especially in personal and social development. Relationships with adults are warm, and children play in harmony together. They are keen to learn, especially when they have the opportunity to choose activities. The balance of activities, however, does not always allow children enough time to initiate their own investigations. Children know how to keep themselves safe, for example, when using scissors and bodkins or when playing outside on the toy vehicles. Their behaviour is exemplary. The well-qualified and experienced staff successfully promote personal, physical and social learning and well-being. They plan well, using their ongoing observations and assessments to pitch activities at an appropriate level of challenge.

The spacious indoor and outdoor areas are extremely well resourced. All equipment is of high quality and children treat resources carefully, willingly taking responsibility for setting out and tidying up. Good relationships with parents mean that staff acquire insights into children's home circumstances and that parents gain a good idea about how well their children are getting on. Parents are encouraged to help during the school day and those that do so provide valuable support, typically helping children with letters and sounds and early reading skills.

The provision is well managed. Leaders of the pre-school unit and the Reception area have a good idea of strengths and areas for development. The pre-school has a separate entrance, which limits day-to-day liaison. Notwithstanding this constraint, there is room for a closer partnership between the two areas so that good practice can be

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shared and to enable common issues to be addressed collectively.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
Taking into account:	
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 of the Early Years Foundation Stage	2

Views of parents and carers

All but two parents felt their children enjoyed school. A very small minority of written comments expressed concerns about how behaviour is managed. The inspection found no evidence to support this. Indeed, relationships across the school were very good. A few parents raised concerns about the school's response to bullying. This was not borne out by the evidence. Pupils knew the difference between bullying and occasional squabbles. They said that, on the rare occasions bullying did occur, it was dealt with fairly.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Ashmead Combined School 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 149 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 537 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	92	62	55	37	2	1	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	93	63	49	33	4	3	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	66	45	75	51	7	5	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	70	47	70	47	6	4	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	76	51	67	42	3	2	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	63	43	77	52	5	3	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	57	39	80	54	9	6	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)	43	30	92	57	8	6	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	50	34	88	60	8	5	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	65	44	63	43	13	9	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	47	32	88	60	10	7	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	62	42	80	54	1	0	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	73	49	69	46	4	3	0	0

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 inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

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 were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

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.



8th February 2010

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Ashmead Combined School, Aylesbury HP21 8SU

Thank you for making my colleagues and me welcome when we visited your school. We agree with you that it is a good school and saw for ourselves how much you enjoy life at Ashmead. We saw how much fun you had. Children make a good start in the early years' classes. They are keen to learn and we have suggested that they could choose more activities for themselves. All in all, you are making good progress through the school and most of you are on course to reach the expected levels by the time you leave.

Many of you benefit from the extra support you receive in class and from working outside lessons with the teaching assistants. They do a great job. You clearly enjoy sport and you understand how exercise can contribute to health and fitness. Despite the fact that you really enjoy school, some of you have too much time off. This is mainly because of holidays during term time so we have asked the school to see if they can reduce these so that your school work does not suffer.

It was interesting to find out how much the school council, prefects and befrienders contribute and we know the adults appreciate the many other ways that children help the school to run smoothly. All the adults work hard to help you. The joint headteachers have gathered a lot of information about how well you are doing and we have suggested that the governors could take a close look at this to help them identify what the school is doing well and what could be improved.

We are sure you will continue to do your best and get the most out of all the school has to offer, and wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely

Rob Crompton

Lead inspector

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