

Amherst School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118281
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	339182
Inspection dates	28–29 September 2009
Reporting inspector	Richard Blackmore

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 of pupils on the school roll	374
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Irene Stone
Headteacher	Derry Wiltshire
Date of previous school inspection	6 February 2007
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by three additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 12 lessons and held meetings with governors, staff and groups of pupils. The inspectors looked at a sample of the pupils' work and assessment records, especially the tracking information designed to show pupils' progress. Other documentation was also scrutinised, including the school's self-evaluation evidence, its development plans, and child protection and care information. Inspectors observed the school's work including 155 responses to parental questionnaires.

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

- current pupil progress and attainment
- how well the school is improving the progress of pupils in science
- how well assessment is used to provide support and sufficiently challenge pupils to raise their achievement in science
- pupils' understanding of other cultures

Information about the school

This is a larger than average-sized junior school. Almost all of the pupils are from White British backgrounds, the rest representing a wide range of other ethnic groups. The current proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and pupils for whom English is an additional language is below the national average. Pupils come from varied social circumstances; fewer than average receive free school meals. The headteacher was in post at the time of the last inspection, but many of the senior staff are relatively new to their roles. The school holds the Healthy School award, the Sportsmark and Artsmark Gold.

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?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

Amherst is an outstanding school that helps pupils to achieve very well and attain highly. The standards reached in mathematics and English at the end of Year 6 are well above those found nationally. In science though pupils do not reach such exceptionally high standards and this is the reason why progress overall is judged as good rather than outstanding. Nevertheless, attainment in science is above the national average. The highly-developed relationships between staff and pupils create a very positive atmosphere which helps develop pupils into very confident, articulate and caring young people. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the work of the school and its leadership. Many wrote highly positive comments about their children's school experience, typified by the remark, 'My son loves coming to school.'

Pupils' outstanding knowledge of other cultures is due to the way the school provides a rich range of experiences, for example involving cooking and food sessions by chefs from nearby restaurants and dancing by people from different countries. Behaviour is outstanding as is pupils' enjoyment of school. Pupils talk enthusiastically about the activities they do in and out of class and how school staff help them. Pupils make a good contribution to their own school community through the school council and a range of other roles, and are involved within the wider community through activities such as raising money for charity, proving particularly successful in relation to the British Heart Foundation.

Pupils of all abilities achieve well, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. This is because the curriculum and the care, guidance and support provided for pupils are outstanding. Staff ensure that the outstanding curriculum is broad and made relevant to the school's pupils. As a result it is very effective in helping pupils to gain strong academic and personal skills. A wide range of activities is provided, including table tennis and magic. Pupils have the opportunity to learn an instrument, to sing with quality because of the excellent guidance and skill of the lead teacher. The depth and richness of the curriculum are also evidenced by the high-quality displays of arts and crafts.

Teaching seen during the inspection effectively used exciting resources to make learning real and provide first-hand experiences, including information and communication technology, which provides a springboard for energetic learning. There is effective use of assessment which teachers use carefully to plan the next steps in pupils' learning. Feedback through marking and talking to pupils shows them how to improve their work and leads to accurate targets being set for pupils. Less effective lessons, which constituted only a small proportion of those seen, are marked by teachers excessively guiding pupils, leading to insufficient challenge and opportunities to extend pupils'

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independence. Consequently, learning slows as pupils rely too much on teachers. The headteacher's leadership and management are outstanding and pivotal to the school's improvement and success. His very capable leadership is underpinned by an unstinting focus on providing and continually improving high calibre and varied experiences for pupils. He has built effectively on the many strengths found in the previous inspection and his determination and commitment to improvement are shared by staff and governors with all the adults working closely together. Governors' outstanding contributions to the highly accurate analysis of the school's strengths and weaknesses and subsequent improvement plans greatly support the school's determined drive towards success for all pupils. Leadership at all levels is highly reflective and robust, rightly recognising the need for marginal tightening of monitoring teaching. The school has outstanding capacity to improve.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Bring all teaching up the quality of the best already on offer at the school by:
- ensuring teachers always provide tasks which offer sufficient challenge, especially in science
- enabling pupils to become more effective and independent learners.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**1**

Pupils are very successfully helped to develop good learning habits, working well together and enjoying the experiences the school offers. There are quicker rates of progress in English and mathematics than in science due to greater challenge and expectation made by teachers. In an outstanding mathematics lesson, for example, Year 4 pupils relished the high level of thinking that was required by the teacher's probing questions and quick changes to problems. In lessons pupils respond rapidly to questions but say they would sometimes like work to be a little harder. In science pupils have less opportunity to practise skills independently and this slows progress.

In the most recent test results pupils attained very highly and this demonstrated that they had made good progress from their above average starting points. Although pupils did less well in science, standards exceeded the national average in all three subjects tested. In English and mathematics, pupils' attainment was well above average with half of all pupils reaching higher levels. As a result of the effective use of the school's constantly developing assessment procedures, pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those whose first language is not English are now achieving more consistently than they did in the past and making good progress. This is beginning to help close the gap between standards in science and the other subjects, but there is still more to do and this already features in the school's development planning.

Pupils' outstanding spiritual, moral and social development is evident in their mature and sensitive approach to supporting one another and their participation in lessons and assemblies. Pupils say they feel very safe and this clearly has its roots in the school's high quality. They are rightly proud of having important roles in the school, for example

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house captains and prefects. Pupils have a very thorough knowledge of how to be healthy because the curriculum and teachers promote this very effectively through the outstanding personal development programme. Attendance is good. Very good basic skills, well-established opportunities for pupils to share ideas and work together, and good developments in information and communication technology prepare pupils extremely well for the future.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	1
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	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

Teaching is typified by very good relationships and activities successfully being made interesting and practical. This gives pupils a feel for real-life situations and problems to solve which ensures learning is systematic, real and engaging. Teachers use different skills within a range of subjects, for example opportunities for writing are widely practised across the curriculum and pupils confidently produce extended pieces of work. This is helping pupils to reach high standards in English. Teachers are generally adept at spotting, and intervening, when pupils make mistakes. They use these opportunities to ensure full understanding and grasp of ideas and concepts. In Year 5, through an

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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enjoyable game, additional explanation provided helpful support when pupils misunderstood an aspect of coordinates. However, on occasions, lessons are sometimes over directed by the teacher and, as a result, pupils have too few opportunities to learn through independent investigation and enquiry which restrict their progress, for example in science.

The school has a wealth of diverse clubs and this is a community effort with many parents contributing to keeping pupils active, for example the table tennis club which is hugely enjoyed. These out-of-school hours clubs significantly contribute to pupils' personal development and their academic standards. Furthermore, the success of the curriculum in supporting learning owes much to the hard work of staff who have ensured that meaningful links are made between subjects. Music is well promoted through specialist teaching and pupils enjoy plenty of sporting activities, often taking part in locally organised school events. In addition, an extensive range of visits and visitors helps bring the curriculum to life and makes learning even more enjoyable.

The care given to pupils is exemplary and partnership with other agencies is thoroughly embedded in the work of the school. The emotional support for pupils is very good and, as a result, the school has an exceptionally supportive atmosphere. The school has effective systems to support pupils who need additional guidance and support and provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are exceptionally managed. Pupils who are gifted and talented are recognised quickly and are provided with opportunities and experiences to progress well.

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?

The highly effective teamwork of the talented senior leadership makes a significant contribution to the high standards in personal and academic work. There is a corporate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development based on an accurate diagnosis of its work through self-evaluation and, because of their considerable involvement in the school's development, staff morale is high. There is a strong sense of community, with excellent partnerships between the school and parents. Effective and efficient systems are in place to safeguard pupils and meet current requirements. The school's promotion of community cohesion is outstanding. There are highly developed links with the local and international community with pen pals in Sri Lanka, which benefit pupils' cultural and moral development and help develop their knowledge and

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understanding of the underdeveloped areas of the world. The pupils' knowledge of different part of the United Kingdom is being developed through links with a London school. This excellent partnership and others are key to the school's success and impact on a wide variety of pupils' learning. Governors have an excellent understanding of how well pupils are doing as a result of asking challenging questions of the headteacher and other senior staff. The school is highly active in ensuring equality for all and celebrates and values different skills and abilities throughout its work.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	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 equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	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

Views of parents and carers

Parents are overwhelmingly happy with the school overall and say that their children enjoy attending and are safe. They confirm that pupils are helped to adopt healthy lifestyles. A very large majority say that leadership is good, but a small minority feels that the school does not take enough account of their views or that behaviour is dealt with well enough. A few feel that the school does not always inform them well enough about their children's progress. The inspectors noted that there are many occasions, including the correct number of parents' evenings and informal meetings, where pupil progress is discussed and parents can air and discuss their views. Inspection findings showed the school deals very effectively with behaviour.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Amherst 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 12 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 155 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 374 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	112	79	33	21	0	0	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	110	71	44	28	0	0	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	96	62	55	36	4	3	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	107	69	44	28	2	1	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	117	76	33	21	2	1	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	96	62	55	36	3	2	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	111	72	42	27	0	0	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)	107	69	40	26	0	0	2	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	107	69	43	28	0	0	2	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	94	61	49	32	6	4	1	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	81	52	60	39	6	4	2	1
The school is led and managed effectively	128	83	23	15	2	1	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	130	84	20	13	2	1	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.



Dear Pupils

Inspection of Amherst School, Sevenoaks TN13 2AX

Thank you for helping us when we visited your school. We enjoyed talking with you and you all helped us to get to know your school really quickly. Your school gives you an outstanding education. It helps you make good progress because of the effective teaching and excellent curriculum, including the clubs you told us you really enjoyed. We were particularly impressed with your brilliant singing. Here are some of the highlights of your school.

- You make good progress and your standards of work are high (especially in English and mathematics), but we know your science could be better.
- You have a super knowledge of how to keep healthy and safe.
- You have a terrific variety of clubs to take part in.
- You make an excellent contribution to the school and local community.
- You have very good relationships with the staff.
- You told us you really enjoy school.
- The adults in school look after you very well.

We have asked your headteacher, staff and governors to do something to make your school even better. We have asked them to make all teaching as good as the best so that it makes you think more and to give you more opportunities to complete your work by yourselves. You can help too by letting teachers know if you find the work too easy.

Best wishes for the future.

Yours faithfully

Richard Blackmore

Lead inspector

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