

# Combs Middle School

## Inspection report

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Unique Reference Number	124820
Local Authority	Suffolk
Inspection number	340664
Inspection dates	16 – 17 September 2009
Reporting inspector	Ian Seath HMI

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

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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	435
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Tracy Crow
Headteacher	John Shield
Date of previous school inspection	16-17 May 2007
School address	Lavenham Way Stowmarket Suffolk IP14 2BZ
Telephone number	01449 674666
Fax number	01449 775282
Email address	ad.combs.m@talk21.com

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## Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 32 lessons and held meetings with pupils, teachers and managers, the chair of governors and a representative of the local authority. They observed the school's work, looked at pupils' work, as well as administrative and other documents. Completed questionnaires were received from 100 parents and carers.

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

- The progress made and standards reached by pupils across their whole time at the school.
- The improvement of teaching and its effect on learning.
- Care, guidance and support of pupils, especially those who need it most.
- The school's self assessment processes.

## Information about the school

The school is smaller than average although the number of pupils on roll has increased in recent years. It serves an area of relatively low deprivation with a lower than average proportion of students who are known to be eligible for free school meals. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is a little lower than average. The number of students from ethnic or other minority heritage is low. The school is the subject of local authority plans to reorganise middle school provision. The school has the Investors in People award, Sportsmark and Healthy Schools status. It is also accredited as meeting the Financial Management Standards in Schools and has an Eco school award.

The school has recently undergone a period staffing turbulence. At the time of inspection an externally appointed acting headteacher had been in post for only a short time.

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

3

## Main findings

This is a good school that has recently undergone a period of significant uncertainty but is now beginning to regain the momentum of improvement. Some aspects of this improvement have yet to be fully embedded across the school but the pace of change is rapid. The school is well regarded in the community that it serves.

The school's good quality of teaching and learning has been sustained since the last inspection. Together with effective guidance and support this has enabled all groups of pupils to make good progress across their time at the school. As a consequence, they reach standards significantly higher than expected by the time they leave. This was confirmed by extensive lesson observations during the inspection. Pupils learn effectively in class. They demonstrate good behaviour, and in Years 7 and 8 they question and challenge teachers regularly with good contributions in class. As a consequence, standards improved significantly in the last year.

The new headteacher and management team have now made a good start in giving the school a direction for continued improvement. They have introduced a better self assessment system and have identified correctly the most significant areas for improvement. At subject level these systems are now being used successfully in English and science but their use is not yet fully established across the school. Where used well, challenging targets for improvement have been set and progress against them monitored effectively. In other areas planning is less clearly defined. The school's overall development plan is good. The school recognises the need to improve its satisfactory contribution to community cohesion by further developing pupils' awareness of cultural diversity.

A formal lesson observation system has not yet been fully implemented or systematically applied across the school. Because of this, the school has not as yet been able to identify effectively the best practice or to share it between subjects. It has been slow to improve teaching and learning beyond that seen at the last inspection so the school's capacity for sustained improvement is satisfactory rather than good.

## What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve assessment practice within three months by
  - ensuring that the best practice seen in English and science is disseminated

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- to other subjects through;
  - regular monitoring of assessment; and
  - cross-subject moderation of assessment outcomes to ensure consistency
- Embed a programme of cultural diversity in the curriculum and beyond within 12 months by
  - encouraging visits and celebration days;
  - extending curriculum work on beliefs and values; and
  - developing more extensive overseas links
- Within three months, embed a comprehensive lesson observation so that lesson observations
  - are systematic;
  - have an emphasis on learning rather than what the teacher does;
  - enable a detailed compilation of the school's developmental needs;
  - are externally and internally moderated;
  - identify and share good practice; and
  - include an evaluation of assessment practice including marking and homework

## Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

When pupils enter the school in Year 5 their prior attainment is around the national average, though well below for writing. At Key Stage 2 they make the progress expected and attain standards that are around national averages in all key subjects. In Years 7 and 8 their progress accelerates because the teaching is more challenging. Consequently they reach standards that are much higher than expected for all key subjects. Pupils leave the school well prepared for transition to secondary school.

In class most pupils are competent learners. Although a small minority of parents were concerned about how poor behaviour was handled by the school, inspectors observed good behaviour both in class and around school. Pupils often support each other well especially in Years 7 and 8. The work they produce is often of a high standard although pupils' literacy skills are more variable than expected especially in Years 5 and 6. In Key Stage 3 classes pupils often ask challenging questions that demonstrate an underlying curiosity. Many pupils are quick to grasp new or complex concepts, particularly in science. Pupils enjoy their learning and time at school, a point echoed by a very large majority of parents.

Overall, there are no significant differences between the achievement of boys and girls. Pupils who receive extra support achieve in line with their peers. Attendance is close to the national average with an improving trend.

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*These are the grades for pupils' outcomes*

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment <sup>1</sup>	2
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 <sup>1</sup>	3
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

## How effective is the provision?

Teaching and learning are good, as at the last inspection. This agrees with the school's own judgement. A small number of classes were outstanding, with a higher proportion of the best teaching in Years 7 and 8. Teachers have good subject knowledge. Most lessons have a good pace and challenge pupils well so that learning is good. Good resources are well used in class. The use of assessment is sometimes inconsistent, for example, in the quality of marking or the setting of homework. The monitoring of progress is very effective in English and science but not as well developed in other areas. Despite this, teachers have a good understanding of pupils' needs and abilities and generally structure classes accordingly. Pupils value the work of teaching and learning assistants but lesson planning does not always deploy them effectively in class.

Pupils are well cared for. Support is good and pupils receive good guidance throughout their time at the school. As a result, they are well prepared for the transition to secondary school. Attendance is monitored effectively and absence followed up quickly.

The school's good curriculum is broad and balanced, providing effective opportunities for learning. It is enhanced by a good range of extra-curricular activities in which most pupils participate. Pupils' personal development is well supported with a good transition between Key Stages 2 and 3. Pupils complete Key Stage 3 a year early in key subjects so that they are better prepared for entry into secondary school. The

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<sup>1</sup> 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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school provides for additional support in literacy and numeracy for those who need it.

*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	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

## How effective are leadership and management?

Over the last year the school has undergone a period of turbulence in its operation and staffing. An acting headteacher has very recently been appointed, together with a number of other staff and managers. Despite these exceptional circumstances, all staff have ensured that pupils have continued to make good progress and reach standards that are significantly higher than expected. Teaching and learning have remained good, as they were at the last inspection. Pupil achievement improved further in 2009.

The new headteacher and his managers have given the school a purposeful direction. They are successfully and quickly driving up the expectations which the school has for itself. Responsibilities have been clarified and accountability improved. They have been aided in this by a good governing body whose actions have effectively driven the improvement process. Parents, pupils and staff speak positively about the recent changes and they support improvements.

Teachers generally have a good understanding of their pupils. However, target setting and monitoring of progress towards them is inconsistent between subjects. This is because assessment is not moderated centrally so that consistency can be achieved. Taken with the lack of systematic lesson observations, this means that the leadership and management of teaching and learning is satisfactory rather than good. The school recognises this and is in the process of forming a teaching and learning management group to address the issues.

The school meets requirements for safeguarding well. Governors monitor the effectiveness of equality of opportunity policies and evaluate the performance of different groups. The requirements for race relations are met. Inspectors observed no discriminatory practice at the school. All staff work hard to ensure that, for example, those with restricted mobility are able to participate in learning fully

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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	3
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	3
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	3
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

## Views of parents and carers

A total of 100 completed questionnaires were received from parents. Of these, 87% reported that their child enjoyed school and 94% felt that the school keeps their child safe. Responses were similarly high in many other questions indicating overall satisfaction with the school. The significant categories of parents disagreeing were for the school dealing effectively with unacceptable behaviour (31%) and that the school did not take account of parental suggestions or concerns (18%). The inspection team agreed with the views of parents and carers.

## Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Combs middle 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 100 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 435 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	33	33%	54	54%	10	10%	1	1%
The school keeps my child safe	30	30%	64	64%	5	5%	0	0%
The school informs me about my child's progress	13	13%	71	71%	13	13%	0	0%
My child is making enough progress at this school	15	15%	68	68%	13	13%	1	1%
The teaching is good at this school	19	19%	69	69%	10	10%	1	1%
The school helps me to support my child's learning	13	13%	68	68%	16	16%	1	1%
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	14	14%	73	73%	11	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)	26	26%	59	59%	14	14%	0	0%
The school meets my child's particular needs	19	19%	64	64%	11	11%	2	2%
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	15	15%	50	50%	26	26%	5	5%
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	13	13%	63	63%	17	17%	1	1%
The school is led and managed effectively	12	12%	73	73%	9	9%	1	1%
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	24	24%	66	66%	7	7%	2	2%

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 all 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

	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
Type of school	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

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>the following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.</li><li>■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.</li><li>■ The quality of teaching.</li><li>■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.</li><li>■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.</li></ul>
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.



18<sup>th</sup> September 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Combs Middle School IP14 2BZ

As you will know, I spent two days in your school this week, together with three other inspectors. We talked with many of you and your teachers, looked at your work, and sat in on most of your classes. We were also pleased to receive a lot of questionnaires from your parents. Throughout this you were well behaved and polite – thank you.

Your school is a good one and it is improving, although this process has only started quite recently. We found out lots of things. For example the teaching you receive is good, and you learn well so that you leave well prepared for the next school. You and your parents told us that you felt safe and were well cared for and we agreed.

Your new headteacher has begun to make many changes to improve your school even further. He agrees with our findings because plans are already in hand to make the changes which we have asked for. We have asked the school to improve the ways that it checks teaching so that the best ideas are shared among teachers. As part of this we have asked that the school improves the ways that it checks how well you are doing. We have also asked that you experience more about other cultures in what you learn.

We also thought that you were well behaved in class and that you try hard to learn and succeed. It is good that many of you ask questions in class if you are not sure, or because you are curious. Please keep doing this and do not be afraid to ask if you are not sure about something. We thought that your school has many strengths and one of them is you.

You also told us that the amount of bullying is low. You can help to keep it like that by talking to a teacher if you are affected. Remember that it is your education. The chances are that when you leave Combs school you will be well placed to succeed at your next school

Yours faithfully

Ian Seath

Her Majesty's Inspector

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