

Houghton Conquest Lower School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109458
Local Authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	356550
Inspection dates	27–28 September 2010
Reporting inspector	Margaret Goodchild

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	4–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	60
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Margaret Litherth
Headteacher	Catherine McCarthy
Date of previous school inspection	6 March 2008
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. Nine lessons or parts of lessons were observed and four teachers were seen, as well as staff in the Early Years Centre. Meetings were held with staff, members of the governing body and a group of pupils. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at information about pupils' progress, evidence of monitoring and self-evaluation, a variety of the school's policies and safeguarding documentation. In addition, they analysed the questionnaires returned by 55 parents and carers, by 18 members of staff and 19 pupils.

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

- The effectiveness of changes to provision in the Reception class and the Early Years Centre.
- How well leaders tackle any factors that restrict pupils' achievement in order to ensure all make at least good progress.
- The extent to which the governing body plays a key part in checking the school's effectiveness and driving improvement.

Information about the school

The school is much smaller than most primary schools. There are rather more boys than girls, and the percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is well below average. Nearly all pupils are of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is average; their main difficulties are behavioural, emotional and social. A very small proportion of the pupils are from Traveller backgrounds or looked after by the local authority. Following the retirement of the previous headteacher in December 2008, a new headteacher took over the interim leadership of the school in January 2009 and her post was made permanent in March 2009. The school has National Healthy Schools status and the Active Mark award.

As part of the school's extended services, the Early Years Centre provides childcare for children aged two to five in a pre-school, after-school and holiday club. This provision has been reorganised by the new headteacher since the last childcare inspection.

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 is a good school that has sustained and built on the strengths found at the last inspection. It has strong support from parents and carers. One expressed this by saying, 'The school is the centre of this wonderful community. Our daughter skips to school every day and is passionate about it. The staff are encouraging her to excel and are always on hand to speak with us'.

Pupils achieve well and reach above average standards. The small number of pupils in each year group has been a significant factor in the fluctuation in standards from year to year at the end of Year 2, with attainment ranging from broadly average to high. At the end of Year 4, standards exceed national expectations and are sometimes high. Progress within key stages has varied somewhat in recent years, but pupils who left in 2010 made good progress during their time at the school. Lesson observation, pupils' work and assessment information show that current progress is good at Key Stages 1 and 2 as a result of good teaching and a curriculum that is matched well to pupils' needs.

The school cares well for pupils and does much to raise their self-esteem and develop their confidence. Pupils feel safe because of the supportive and caring atmosphere. They are polite and respectful as well as being supportive of one another. They behave well but their skills in quiet, independent working are not as well developed as they could be. Despite many strengths in teaching and learning, teachers do not always convey sufficiently high expectations about the need for focused, independent working or make clear when pupils are meant to discuss a specific aspect of their work.

Provision within the Early Years Centre has improved a great deal since its last childcare inspection and is now outstanding. It is the 'jewel in the crown' of the school's work. Very good transition arrangements from the pre-school in the Early Years Centre to the Reception class have been established. The outdoor area used by the Reception class has been much improved since the last inspection so that it now provides exciting opportunities for learning and includes a covered area. The school is working with external specialists to raise standards in the Reception year and to improve the quality of provision. For example, it is working to develop the indoor area, which is not as stimulating as it should be. In addition, planning does not identify clearly enough what different groups of children are meant to learn from activities, and the time allocated to literacy and numeracy is not used to full effect.

The school is led well and self-evaluation is mostly accurate. The new headteacher is committed to making the school as good as possible and has made a number of key changes, over the last year that are having a positive effect on pupils' learning and

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indicate that the school is well placed to improve further. Staff training has had a direct impact on standards, the tracking of pupils' progress is much improved and data is used to good effect to identify areas for development. Subject leadership is good in English and mathematics. Developing leadership in non-core subjects has, rightly, been identified as a priority to ensure pupils make equally good progress in all areas. The effectiveness of the governing body has improved considerably since the last inspection and its members are actively involved in monitoring the school's work and driving improvement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise achievement in the Reception year, by:
 - improving the indoor environment so that it stimulates children's learning and provides richer learning opportunities
 - ensuring that lesson planning for adult-led and child-initiated activities is based on the prior attainment of different groups of children
 - making sure that time allocated to promoting children's skills in communication, language and literacy and problem solving, reasoning and numeracy is used to best effect.
- Raise achievement at Key Stages 1 and 2, and build on existing good practice in teaching by and learning, by:
 - developing subject leadership in the non-core subjects
 - conveying consistently high expectations for the way pupils concentrate on set tasks
 - developing pupils' skills in quiet, individual working so that they are able to think independently and discuss their work in a controlled and focused way when asked to do so.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

Attainment on entry is broadly average though it varies from year to year. At Key Stages 1 and 2, pupils do well in literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology, music and physical education and make satisfactory progress in other subjects. Pupils who left school in 2010 made outstanding progress in writing during their time in Key Stage 2. Girls and boys make good progress. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities make similar progress to the rest of the class as a result of the careful identification of their needs and the good support they receive. The very small number of pupils from Traveller backgrounds and who are looked after by the local authority make good progress because the school is sensitive to their needs. The small numbers of pupils of minority ethnic heritage perform at least in line with their peers and achieve well.

Pupils make good progress in most lessons at Key Stages 1 and 2. They are keen to do

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well and particularly enjoy practical tasks that involve them in solving problems. This was the case in a science lesson in Years 3 and 4 where they worked enthusiastically and at a good pace, exploring which materials act as conductors and which as insulators in electrical circuits. The above average rate of attendance reflects pupils' enjoyment of school. They are interested in learning and nearly all concentrate well during whole-class discussions and when the teacher is talking. Once they move off to complete their work, however, they have a tendency to chat continuously to one another about what they are doing. This means that they are not concentrating carefully enough on their work or learning to think for themselves. It also reduces the amount of work they produce in some lessons.

Pupils show a good commitment to healthy living and each class enjoys growing fruit and vegetables in their own garden and learning about sustainable development. Pupils' involvement in initiatives, such as the orienteering club at lunchtimes, has resulted in a great deal of enthusiasm for this type of outdoor pursuit. A high level of participation in extra-curricular sporting activities has led to improved fitness levels and entry in a variety of inter-school competitions. Pupils make a good contribution to the community, especially through their involvement in school and village activities. They have a direct influence on decisions through the school council and their inclusion on working parties. All ages readily take on a range of responsibilities, take an active part in various local events and raise funds for international causes. Pupils are reflective and consider their own and others' experiences. They respond well to opportunities to consider their values at a deep level and are increasingly able to articulate their ideas and feelings. They have a good insight into their own and others' cultures. The school prepares pupils well for the next stage of their education. They make good progress in basic skills and learn about aspects of citizenship, enterprise and the world of work.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	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

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

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	
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 Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2
	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

How effective is the provision?

Teachers have good subject knowledge and the allocation of teaching assistants to a core subject enables them to provide specialised support in literacy and numeracy. Teachers make good use of interactive whiteboards and access to homework tasks through the 'learning platform' at Key Stage 2 is having a positive effect on pupils' motivation. Regular analysis of pupils' progress quickly identifies those needing greater challenge or additional support. Pupils' knowledge and understanding of their literacy and numeracy targets have improved, and marking and oral feedback generally provide helpful advice on how to improve their work.

The curriculum is broad and balanced and promotes pupils' academic achievement and personal development well. One parent commented on the increasingly imaginative learning opportunities, saying, 'The new headteacher has made great strides in trying to make the curriculum more creative and the learning more purposeful and interactive.' A good range of clubs and other enrichment activities stimulates pupils' enthusiasm for learning. Pupils are involved in curriculum development, for example, through involvement in planning and building an outdoor 'classroom' made out of living willow. Through collaboration with other educational establishments, the school is able to offer programmes for pupils who are gifted and talented.

The school works closely with external agencies to support pupils with additional needs, and is particularly sensitive to the needs of pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable. It makes very good use of its parent support worker in its work with families. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities have precise targets in their individual education plans, and those who need extra help with their social and emotional development have good opportunities to work with an adult in a small group on tasks matched to their needs. However, at times, teachers are not as clear as they should be in communicating expectations for behaviour in lessons, including for pupils with behavioural difficulties. Transition arrangements, when children move up to Reception and move on at the end of Year 4, are very well developed.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2

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The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2
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How effective are leadership and management?

The clear vision of the new headteacher has resulted in an increased drive for improvement and more rigorous monitoring of pupils' progress. Half-termly data analysis ensures that staff are clear about priorities for improvement and their responsibility in raising achievement. Initial emphasis has been placed on improving English and mathematics but the leadership of most other subjects is less well developed in a small school where each teacher carries a number of responsibilities. The school has begun to address this through training and is seeking out best practice in other schools. The governing body is actively involved in driving new initiatives and has increased the rigour with which it monitors all aspects of the school's work.

The school ensures that different groups of pupils are given equal opportunities and has effective procedures for tackling discrimination. Revised safeguarding policies provide clear guidance, staff are well trained in child protection and any concerns about individual pupils are followed up promptly. Close working relationships with key agencies reduces the risk of harm to pupils.

The good engagement of parents and carers and close partnership with other educational establishments contribute well to school improvement. The school has a good understanding of its own community and promotes local cohesion very well. It has just forged a link with a school in a different context in the United Kingdom and is working to establish global links.

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	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

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Early Years Foundation Stage

Children in the Early Years Centre learn in a vibrant and stimulating environment and receive high quality care. Strong teamwork amongst the staff and excellent relationships with children enable them to make outstanding progress in their personal, social and emotional development and in their communication and language skills. Progress is at least good in all other areas of learning. Staff in the Early Years Centre have an in-depth understanding of the Early Years Foundation Stage and work continuously to refine provision. Assessment and its use in planning are exemplary and key to the high quality learning experiences provided. Close links with parents and carers ensure they are kept very well informed. The provision fully meets registration requirements and is led and managed exceptionally well. Very effective transition arrangements are in place when children move up from the Early Years Centre to the Reception class.

The school is working to enhance the satisfactory progress children make in the Reception year. At the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage in 2010, children's attainment exceeded national expectations in some areas of learning but they did less well in aspects of literacy and numeracy. Increased emphasis on numeracy and effective self-evaluation are bringing about ongoing improvement, but teaching and learning remain satisfactory because assessment information does not inform planning sufficiently. Nevertheless, children become quickly absorbed in activities and play happily for extended periods of time. Good systems are in place for recording children's attainment and involving parents and carers in their learning.

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

The proportion of parents and carers who returned the questionnaire was very high. Almost all expressed their satisfaction with the school's work and inspection findings endorse their positive views. A few would like their children to be making faster progress, to have their needs better met and to be prepared more effectively for the next stage of their education. The school is now checking pupils' progress regularly and so is well placed to identify any who are not progressing as well as they should. It has improved its transition arrangements and inspection findings suggest that individual needs are met well. Parents' views are sought and though a few parents and carers

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would like the school to take their suggestions into account more, a similar number expressed satisfaction with how well the school has responded to their concerns.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Houghton Conquest Lower 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 55 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 60 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	37	67	16	29	1	2	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	36	65	18	33	1	2	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	30	55	23	42	2	4	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	31	56	18	33	4	7	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	30	55	20	36	1	2	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	32	58	20	36	0	0	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	35	64	20	36	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)	24	44	23	42	3	5	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	25	45	25	45	3	5	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	27	49	24	44	1	2	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	23	42	25	45	3	5	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	30	55	19	35	2	4	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	35	64	16	29	0	0	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

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	58	36	4	2
Primary schools	8	43	40	9
Secondary schools	10	35	42	13
Sixth forms	13	39	45	3
Special schools	33	42	20	4
Pupil referral units	18	40	29	12
All schools	11	42	38	9

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 are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 March 2010 and are the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn and spring terms 2009/10 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.



29 September 2010

Dear Children

Inspection of Houghton Conquest Lower School, Houghton Conquest, MK45 3LL

Thank you for making us feel welcome when we came to inspect your school. We enjoyed our time with you and were pleased to see how well you get on with one another. You told us that you enjoy school and feel safe. You make a good contribution to the school and to village life, for example, distributing harvest gifts to elderly people, singing at the church and putting on performances in the village. You are making good progress with your work and reach standards by the end of Year 4 that are above those in most schools. Teaching is good and the school provides you with interesting activities that make learning fun. I could see that you particularly like practical activities and you have all enjoyed creating the living willow classroom. The Early Years Centre is excellent and the staff there care for children extremely well and provide really exciting things to do.

The new headteacher has made a good start in improving the school. She and the governing body are very keen to make it as good as possible for you. We want to help them with this and so we have asked them to make some changes. The Reception classroom needs to be a more colourful and interesting place to learn, and all the activities you take part in need to be matched to the next steps in learning so that you make as much progress as possible. Although those of you in the Year 1 and 2 and Year 3 and 4 classes behave well and are keen to do well, we noticed that you tend to chat too much in class. This means that you are not concentrating carefully enough on your work or learning to think for yourself. We have asked teachers to make sure you spend time working on your own and only talk about your work when they have asked you to do so. This might seem like a big change at first, but it will help you to make better progress. For you, it just means learning a new and better habit that will stand you in good stead when you move on to your next school. I am sure you will do your best with this and it will also help your school to improve.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Goodchild

Lead inspector

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