

Thornhill Lower School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109504
Local Authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	356562
Inspection dates	26–27 May 2011
Reporting inspector	Christopher Parker

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 under pilot arrangements; it was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	First
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	187
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Julie Clatworthy
Headteacher	Julia Lawson
Date of previous school inspection	14 April 2008
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Age group	3–9
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Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by three additional inspectors. Sixteen lessons, taught by seven teachers, were observed. In addition, a number of shorter visits were made to classrooms. Meetings were held with pupils about their reading, writing and mathematics. Inspectors also held discussions with the headteacher and curriculum team members, and the Chair of the Governing Body. The inspectors looked at a range of documentation, such as the school development plan, and a sample of the pupils' work. Questionnaire responses from pupils, staff and 41 parents and carers were considered.

Information about the school

This is an average size-school. Pupils are mainly from White British backgrounds. One quarter of the pupils are known to be eligible for free school meals, which is well above average. The proportion from minority ethnic groups is well below average – a very few pupils are of African heritage. Very few speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities has fallen and is now in line with the national average. There are before- and after-school clubs managed by the governing body. There have been many changes of staff since the last inspection, some of which have been recent.

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	2
Achievement	2
Teaching	2
Leadership and management	1
Behaviour and safety	1
Does the school adequately promote the pupils' well-being?	Yes
Does the school adequately promote community cohesion?	Yes
Does the school provide value for money?	Yes

Key findings

This is a good school which has improved considerably and is extremely well placed to improve further. The leadership and management are outstanding. The headteacher and the governing body have demonstrated an unrelenting drive to provide the best for the pupils. Together with the staff they have created an ethos which promotes very positive attitudes to learning and an environment that allows the pupils to feel safe and happy. Their consistently high expectations of the pupils are rewarded with excellent behaviour and application in lessons.

The pupils are achieving well. They are making good progress from relatively low starting points. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are making good progress through a wide range of activities, both those led by the teacher and those they choose themselves. There is a strong trend of improvement in attainment, which is now in line with expectations by the end of Year 4. This is because the school has systematically focused on developing teaching and learning, and the curriculum, in reading, writing and, more recently, in mathematics. As a result, progress in reading is rapid and attainment has risen to well in excess of expectations. The pupils are making good progress in writing, but their progress in mathematics is not as rapid or as consistent throughout the school.

Some lessons are outstanding, notably in Year 4. In most lessons the teachers take full account of the needs of the groups within the class, but occasionally the work for a few is a little too easy or too hard. The teachers talk to groups and individual pupils a great deal. They help them to understand how well they are doing, and carefully assess how successful the pupils have been. The curriculum interests and motivates the pupils through a wide range of exciting topics.

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What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Accelerate the progress that the pupils make in mathematics so that their attainment reaches the levels reached in reading by:
 - providing a broad range of opportunities for the pupils to use and practise their mathematical skills and knowledge
 - involving parents and carers in promoting mathematical learning in everyday problem-solving situations.

Main report

The school has made considerable strides forward and it is continuing to improve strongly. The marked improvements are underpinned by the very determined and ambitious leadership of the headteacher and the governing body. The headteacher has trained, coached and improved the teaching team, which has been particularly successful in increasing the progress the pupils make and in raising their attainment. From relatively low starting points, pupils are now reaching the level expected by the end of Year 4, and exceeding it in reading.

In addition to comprehensive assessment arrangements and detailed tracking of each pupil's progress, the teachers provide thorough marking and thoughtful feedback. The headteacher and teachers analyse the performance of both groups and individuals. Last year they looked closely at the performance of girls, who were not achieving as well as boys in mathematics. They talked to the girls to gain their views. In response they amended the curriculum and tried differing teaching arrangements, such as teaching the girls on their own. The teachers feel that current setting arrangements are working well, but have yet to evaluate the impact of the most recent changes on the performance of the girls. This, along with the carefully targeted teaching and constant encouragement for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, illustrates very well the school's commitment to equality of opportunity. The successful steps taken by the school to improve teaching and learning have reduced the proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities from one third to one fifth.

The governing body is very active and highly effective, not only in supporting the school's improvement strategy but also in instigating changes. It has, for example, brought about improvements to lunchtime arrangements, following visits to other successful schools, and to the school's approach to homework, following discussions with parents and carers. The governing body takes full account of the views of pupils, and of parents and carers. It not only steers the school's work but also holds those teachers with additional responsibilities, as well as the headteacher, to account for the school's performance. The governing body carries out a wide range of monitoring and evaluation activities to ascertain the impact of improvement work on pupils' progress and well-being.

Arrangements to keep the pupils as safe as possible are very thorough. As a result,

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pupils say they feel safe and happy at school, and all of the parents and carers who responded to the questionnaire agree. They behave exceptionally well because all members of staff have consistently high expectations of them. Instances of bullying are very rare; pupils, and parents and carers are entirely confident that any such incident would be dealt with effectively. The school has a calm and very purposeful atmosphere which promotes courtesy yet generates high levels of curiosity and engagement. There is a highly positive ethos within the school which strongly promotes the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development through a curriculum designed to inspire and motivate the pupils so that they enjoy learning. For example, to conclude their topic on mountains, the older pupils looked at the Kumaoni people who live in the Himalayas. They followed a typical Kumaon school day which included exercises and fetching water for their families. The pupils play well together and help each other. The older pupils ask each other's views when working collaboratively. All groups of pupils are well cared for, and get on well together during the school day and when they attend before- or after-school clubs.

The pupils have very positive attitudes to school, concentrate well and cooperate fully. The teachers help them to maintain their concentration by structuring their lessons into 'chunks' that frequently change the emphasis or modify the activity. In this way they maintain both high levels of interest and a brisk pace for all pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make) and reading skills is systematic and well matched to the needs of the pupils. Every morning all of the pupils work in small groups, according to their ability. Those pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities benefit considerably from this approach and make good progress. In each lesson the pupils review what they already know, learn and practise new sounds, and apply what they have learned in a reading or writing activity. While the youngest children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are learning single sounds and reading simple words, the oldest and more-able pupils are being challenged to make deductions from the texts they are reading. This approach is now well established. As a result, pupils are making rapid progress and there is a wave of improvement moving through the school. By the end of the Reception Year and the end of Year 1 attainment in reading is close to the expected level; this year in Year 2 and Year 4, it well exceeds expectations.

Although progress in writing is not quite as rapid, the pupils are, nonetheless, making good progress. The benefits of improved spelling and reading are becoming increasingly evident in the pupils' writing. In the Early Years Foundation Stage the children have an appropriate range of opportunities to develop their early writing skills. These are built on effectively, and by Year 4 the pupils are writing for a range of purposes in many different contexts. For example, when they were taking notes as part of their research into how people live in Ethiopia, where they have links with a school.

Improvements in mathematics are not as well established. Nevertheless, the pupils are making secure progress. Mathematical skills are generally well taught. The

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teaching of mathematics to some of the oldest pupils is outstanding. For example, the more-able pupils made rapid progress when adding decimals. However, there are some variations in the quality of teaching which leaders and managers are currently well focused on improving. In conversation, the pupils are a little more reticent about their enjoyment of mathematics, and not as clear about the targets set for them, as they are in reading and writing. Currently, they do not have as extensive a range of opportunities to use and to practise their skills in a range of realistic situations and contexts across the curriculum as they do in reading and writing.

The school has established a very positive relationship with parents and carers, who value the school's work and are extremely pleased with the progress their children are making. Parents and carers have responded positively to frequent reminders of the need for regular attendance, and as a result it has risen to a level that is now broadly average. They also support school events well. However, the teachers who have responsibility for improving attainment in mathematics have had limited success in their efforts to engage parents and carers in their children's mathematical learning.

The school's success in making the marked improvements that are evident in the provision for the pupils, and in closing the considerable gap, that previously existed, with the attainment expected for pupils of this age, is the result of a highly structured approach which has systematically tackled underperformance in reading and writing, and more recently mathematics. The school has a well-focused and clearly prioritised plan in place to sustain these improvements. With a strong record of success to date and the high levels of ambition that the headteacher has for the pupils, the school is extremely well placed to improve further.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

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

The inspection team received 41 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 187 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Q1 My child is happy at school	30	73	11	27	0	0	0	0
Q2 My child feels safe at school	27	66	14	34	0	0	0	0
Q3 The school helps my child to achieve as well as they can	30	73	11	27	0	0	0	0
Q4 The school meets my child’s particular needs	31	76	10	24	0	0	0	0
Q5 The school ensures my child is well looked after	31	76	10	24	0	0	0	0
Q6 Teaching at this school is good	29	71	12	29	0	0	0	0
Q7 There is a good standard of behaviour at this school	20	49	19	46	2	5	0	0
Q8 Lessons are not disrupted by bad behaviour	17	41	16	39	3	7	0	0
Q9 The school deals with any cases of bullying well	22	54	13	32	0	0	0	0
Q10 The school helps me to support my child’s learning	26	63	15	37	0	0	0	0
Q11 The school responds to my concerns and keeps me well informed	30	73	11	27	0	0	0	0
Q12 The school is well led and managed	31	76	9	22	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 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

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	48	6	0
Primary schools	6	47	40	7
Secondary schools	12	39	38	11
Sixth forms	13	42	41	3
Special schools	28	49	19	4
Pupil referral units	14	45	31	10
All schools	10	46	37	7

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 2010 to 31 December 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 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.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

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 achievement of all pupils. ■ Behaviour and safety. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The effectiveness of leadership and management. <p>and taking into consideration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ how well the school promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
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.



10 June 2011

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Thornhill Lower School, Dunstable, LU5 5PE

Thank you for taking the time to talk to the inspectors about your reading, writing and mathematics, and giving them your views about your school. You behave very well indeed and do as your teachers ask you. This means that lessons are very calm and you can get on with your work. The school is very friendly and caring, which helps you to feel safe and to do well. Some of you also said that the school provides lots of interesting things to do, and we agree.

The headteacher, teachers and teaching assistants are helping you to make good progress. They give you a lot of help to make sure that you improve. The teachers have been very successful in helping all of you to improve your reading and writing. Some of you told us how much you enjoy reading and writing because you know your targets and how well you are doing. The teachers have been looking at ways of helping you to do as well in mathematics as you do in reading and writing. We have asked them to give you more opportunities to use your mathematical skills in other subjects, and to involve your parents and carers more.

The headteacher is leading the school extremely well, and is constantly looking at how well it is doing, so that improvements can be made to the opportunities that the school gives you. Attendance has improved, but you can raise it even higher. You can help by attending school every day.

You go to a good school which is getting better and better. You can help by continuing to work hard.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Parker
Lead inspector

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