

The Willows School and Early Years Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110379
Local Authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	310278
Inspection dates	18–19 September 2008
Reporting inspector	Sean O'Toole

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

The registered childcare, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Type of school	Infant
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–7
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	93
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	40
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Michael Hrycak
Headteacher	Mrs Pauline Pickard
Date of previous school inspection	7 June 2004
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Fishermead Boulevard Fishermead Milton Keynes MK6 2LP
Telephone number	01908 528803

Age group	3–7
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01908 528804

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

The Willows has a mixed intake and almost half of the pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds. A high proportion are at an early stage of learning to speak English. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and statements of special educational needs is slightly below average and they have either communication or moderate learning difficulties. Mobility in and out of this oversubscribed school is high. Children start in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) shortly after their third birthday.

The number on roll at the time of inspection was lower than normal due to a staggered nursery intake. Number on roll is more usually around 150 pupils.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school that one parent described as being 'like a lighthouse in the community'. It ensures the highest standards of care and support for its pupils and is outstanding in engaging parents in their children's education. The headteacher, staff and governors excel in reaching out to the local community and have devised programmes that draw in parents and others in order to create a climate of successful learning. As one parent said, 'The school gets everyone involved...by putting on some great courses.'

Parents rightly comment favourably on how their children develop outstanding personal qualities. Pupils' good progress in basic skills and their excellent personal development and well-being thoroughly prepare them for the next school. They have excellent knowledge of healthy living and love the specialist teaching of physical education. They know how to keep themselves safe and know that the staff will deal with any worries speedily. Behaviour is good. The pupils relish opportunities to learn about the wider world and greatly enjoy the excellent range of visits and visitors that do much to enhance learning.

Standards have risen steadily and are close to the national average, representing good success for the pupils given their very low starting points. The building blocks of success start in the EYFS where children become active learners. The focus on reading and writing has been particularly successful and pupils leave the school with secure skills in English. They also make good progress in mathematics but have gaps in their knowledge of mathematical vocabulary and find solving problems difficult. Because the staff provide excellent support and involve parents in the process, those with English as an additional language make rapid gains in communicating and play a full part in the school's life.

Excellent links with The Pebbles Children's Centre, the health service and other agencies enhance the pupils' learning. The curriculum includes exceptional opportunities for pupils and their parents to experience first hand learning and makes a profound impact on pupils' enjoyment and skills in reading and writing. Teaching is good and there are some outstanding aspects. Individual and small group support are especially effective. Vulnerable pupils benefit from well-crafted programmes that are pitched at the right level to enable them to succeed.

Sustained academic improvement and success in developing pupils' personal qualities are clear illustrations of the good capacity for further improvement. Plans are well considered but lack sharp criteria for leaders and governors to keep a check on the school's success. Staff share a common goal to enable all pupils to succeed and they are inspired by the headteacher who provides vision and clarity in her leadership. One parent, summing up the school's success among pupils and parents, said, 'The school is at the hub of the community'.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

When starting in the Nursery, most children are at levels that are well below those expected for their age. They make a good start and quickly settle into the routines. They thoroughly enjoy the challenging and interesting activities provided both inside and outdoors. Throughout the EYFS, children are well motivated and confident in working together. Their personal, social and emotional development is exceptionally good and ensures that they are well-equipped and excited learners. Children thrive because of good teaching and the imaginative curriculum. By the end of Reception, most are working at levels that are close to those expected. Staff use

assessment to identify the needs of different groups and then provide very good support to ensure successful learning. Children new to learning English benefit from well-focused help that enables them to join in everything. The outstanding outdoor area, developed in response to concerns about boys' learning, has helped to narrow the gap between boys' and girls' performance. Activities are well organised and the children respond enthusiastically and work hard. Even the most sensitive children blossom in this safe and caring environment. The staff's attention to children's welfare is outstanding. One delighted parent wrote, 'My son started at the Willows recently but already feels confident and settled because of the staff.'

What the school should do to improve further

- Extend pupils' skills in solving mathematical problems and increase their knowledge of mathematical vocabulary.
- Sharpen up the school's strategic plans so that they include well-focused criteria for leaders and governors to keep a check on the school's success.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Pupils from all backgrounds and abilities thrive because staff use assessment to pinpoint the next steps in learning. By the time they leave the school, most are working at levels that are broadly in line with the national average in reading and writing. Girls are a little in advance of boys but all pupils achieve well. Well-planned initiatives in reading and writing have raised standards and the gap between boys and girls has narrowed. Standards are close to average in mathematics, but some pupils lack confidence in solving problems and have a limited mathematical vocabulary. Those with English as an additional language make very good progress because support from bi-lingual staff and the imaginative use of resources enhance pupils' understanding. Those who have moderate learning difficulties or lack competence in communicating benefit from intensive support that gives them the confidence to become effective learners.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Parents are delighted by their children's improved confidence while at the school and the way that it makes an impact on their own lives. One said, 'The school brings people on...not just the children'. Pupils love coming to school and respond with enthusiasm. They enjoy learning about the different languages and cultures and appreciate the opportunities to take part in celebrations and to taste foods from around the world. More confident bi-lingual pupils like to help those new to learning English. Pupils talk excitedly about the special events, trips and visitors which enrich their learning. One boy said, 'It's great here, I have lots of friends and lots to do'. The school council are involved in decision making and have initiated improvements to the outdoor areas that include challenging and imaginative play equipment. Pupils make firm friendships and work together well. They are cooperative, eager to do well and are proud of the school and their achievements. Pupils reach out to the wider community and are very involved in charitable fund-raising and in finding ways to improve the local environment.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teachers build on the pupils' desire to learn and teach the basic skills regularly and effectively. There is a good balance between creative and more structured learning which has helped to secure improved standards in reading and writing. Sometimes the pace of lessons in mathematics is a little slow and teachers do not place sufficient emphasis on extending pupils' mathematical vocabulary. Teachers are good at matching work to the pupils' abilities and classroom assistants play a full part in supporting groups. Teachers make good use of praise and provide good guidance in their marking. They know the pupils well and use a good range of intervention programmes to enhance learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The school's strong focus on raising standards through a vibrant curriculum enables pupils to make links between subjects and creates a positive climate for learning. The excellent programme of personal, social and health education contributes exceptionally well to pupils' awareness of others' needs and raises their own expectations of what they can achieve. Staff make excellent use of pupils' interests and enthusiasms in planning and, consequently, boys and girls understand the relevance of what they are doing. Visits and visitors enrich the provision. Pupils talk animatedly about what they have learned, remembering in detail these special occasions. A particular success has been involvement in the Writer's Workshop which has raised pupils' competence in English.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

No child is left out because the staff are vigilant in meeting their personal and academic needs through well-focused assessments. Those with communication or moderate learning difficulties respond enthusiastically to the support provided. Similarly, those who are new to speaking English benefit from intensive help that ensures they are included in all of the school's work. The pupils feel safe and secure and have high levels of trust for the adults working with them. The school has robust procedures for safeguarding pupils. Regular reviews of targets and discussions with parents and their children ensure that all pupils receive the help and guidance they need in order to learn effectively.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher has built a good team that is committed to school improvement. She has the trust of staff, parents and governors and has developed an inclusive school, which is at the heart of its community. Senior leaders play their part well and are always looking for ways to improve. Governors provide good support. Leaders and governors have a good understanding of the school's work. Issues are tackled systematically, resulting in improved standards and high levels of care. However, plans are not sufficiently defined to enable leaders and governors to keep a check on how well the school is meeting its objectives. Pupils and parents feel that

their views are valued. The school has outstanding links with its community that have been highly successful in breaking down barriers to learning.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	2
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	2
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	1
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	2
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2

¹Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	2
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

02 October 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of The Willows School and Early Years Centre, Milton Keynes, MK6 2LP

Thank you for being so friendly and for making me feel welcome when I visited your school. Lots of you told me how much you enjoy coming to school and your parents said to me that they would like to be children again so that they could have such good fun. Your school is a good and special place because everyone works hard to make you feel happy and to help you to learn.

Here are some of the good things about your school:

- you get on together, and you are kind and behave well
- your teachers and other staff plan interesting things for you to learn and encourage you to do your best
- the staff are excellent at encouraging your parents and other people to be part of the school
- the adults look after you exceptionally well
- the outdoor area for children in Nursery and Reception is fantastic
- you know a lot about how to eat healthily and enjoy keeping fit
- the youngest children quickly settle into school because they are well cared for.

I have asked your teachers to help to make the school even better by helping you to learn more about mathematical words and to become even better at finding different ways of doing sums. You can help by trying out new ways of adding up and taking away. I have also asked the adults to think a bit more about plans for the future.

I hope that you will always enjoy school as much as you do now.

Yours sincerely

Sean O'Toole

Lead Inspector