

Layston Church of England First School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117390
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326594
Inspection date	4 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Colin Henderson

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	First
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	4–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	139
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	0
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Jo Brown
Headteacher	Mrs Jane Sherwood
Date of previous school inspection	18 May 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	The Causeway Buntingford Hertfordshire SG9 9EU

Age group	4–9
Inspection date	4 June 2009
Inspection number	326594

Telephone number
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: current achievement in the school; the quality of teaching and learning, particularly teachers' skills in using assessment procedures and managing pupils; the care, guidance and support provided; the management roles of key staff, and the effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Evidence was gathered from observation of lessons, scrutiny of pupils' work, discussion with pupils, the staff, parents and governors, and an analysis of school documents and parental questionnaires.

Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail but the inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given its self-evaluation, were not justified and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

This is a smaller-than-average school. Most children come from the local area and from a broad range of social backgrounds. The proportion of pupils eligible for a free school meal is below average. The number from minority ethnic backgrounds is low and very few speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average for a school of this size. A breakfast club and an after-school club are run by a private, independent agency on the school site and are inspected separately. The school holds several national awards.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

'I have nothing but praise for this fabulous school.' This is one of many positive comments given by pupils and parents and clearly shows how highly this school is valued by them. Such remarks accurately reflect that it is, indeed, an outstanding school. Parents commented that they particularly appreciate the buoyant learning atmosphere and caring attitudes: 'I sum up the school in three words - caring, positive and enthusiastic.' The enthusiasm and outstanding leadership of the headteacher have been hugely influential in moving the school forward. Her relentless focus on improving the achievement of each child provides a very clear direction for staff and pupils alike. She has established a very effective team of staff and governors, who work closely together to create an excellent curriculum that meets pupils' different learning and personal needs. It promotes a wide range of practical activities and a vibrant learning atmosphere. Pupils talk excitedly about the many interesting learning activities. Their interest is clearly evident in their positive attitudes and excellent attendance.

Pupils' achievement is excellent. It results from outstanding teaching, pupils' desire to learn, the good support and guidance for each pupil and the determination of the staff to maintain high performance. Parents give very good support. Standards of attainment are significantly above average at the end of Year 2. The school has focused recently on improving pupils' writing skills and their understanding in mathematics. As a result, standards are well above average in these subjects. They are very high by the time the pupils leave at the end of Year 4. The very effective and comprehensive tracking system allows the progress of each pupil to be closely checked each term. Staff use assessments very successfully to identify and support any individual or groups of pupils who are underperforming and not expected to reach their end of year target. Teachers and the excellent teaching assistants provide extra support to ensure that all pupils achieve exceptionally well. For example, the standards of work in English and mathematics attained by over 40% of the current Year 4 match those expected of pupils in Year 6.

Staff and governors check carefully on how well the school is doing. For example, teaching and learning have improved since the last inspection as a result of regular lesson observations by the headteacher and other key staff. These have identified any areas for development, and follow-up visits have targeted these aspects to ensure that improvements have been made. As a result, teaching is never less than good and frequently outstanding. Teachers provide interesting learning activities that capture pupils' imagination and increase their understanding of other communities and cultures. For example, Year 4 pupils act out how a Masai tribe in Kenya would respond to a commercial opportunity that could change their traditional way of life. Teachers manage and challenge their classes very effectively to ensure that pupils' enthusiasm is channelled into their learning. Pupils know clearly what their teachers expect from them and are keen to achieve these high expectations. Teachers, working closely with teaching assistants, manage successfully the small number of pupils whose learning difficulties make sustained concentration difficult. The staff ensure that everyone stays focused on their learning and achieves very well.

Some teachers use constructive marking and individual discussion with pupils to help raise the standard of their work. For example, they use prompts or questions to point out how a piece of work could be improved. They then provide time for the pupil to make use of this guidance and attain high-quality work, for example in Year 4. This exemplary practice is not consistent in each class, as pupils are not always given the opportunity to put the advice into practice.

The strong teamwork includes all members of the school community. Governors are very supportive and much more actively involved in evaluating and improving the school than at the last inspection. For example, their improved understanding of the different social and emotional needs of specific groups of pupils led to more effective use of teaching assistants and better achievement of pupils. Governors ensure that all safeguarding requirements are met. Staff and pupils benefit from a fully secure, safe and attractive working environment that is enhanced by some excellent and stimulating displays of learners' work of the highest quality, for example, in art and design.

Pupils' personal development and well-being are outstanding. They are proud of their school and have a strong sense of belonging and contributing to school and local communities. For example, every pupil belongs to a 'talking circle' which meets once a fortnight to encourage them to put forward their ideas to improve the school. Pupils are gaining a deeper understanding, not only of Christian, but also of different faiths and cultural practices of communities in other parts of this country and the world. This is extended through links, for example, with a school in Leeds and an orphanage in Nepal. Their knowledge of the world of work is enhanced well through opportunities to talk to visitors, such as a travel agent, linked to curriculum themes and their involvement in various fund-raising initiatives, for example, a class 'cake bake'.

Pupils succeed in many areas as learning opportunities are enhanced very well by clubs and trips. Outstanding links with other local schools and community organisations, for example through the sports-partnership scheme provide many opportunities for pupils to participate eagerly in a good range of sports. All learners have an excellent understanding of healthy and safe lifestyles reflecting the school's Activemark and Healthy School status. The school has a very accurate view of its own effectiveness. Its impressive track record of improvement since the last inspection shows it is well placed to enable the newly appointed headteacher, her staff and governors to maintain high standards and the excellent quality of education.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 1

The attainment of most children who start in the Early Years Foundation Stage is in line with expectations for their age. The excellent provision in the Reception class helps them to consistently achieve standards above those expected by the time they enter Year 1. Teaching is of a very high quality and support staff are used effectively to secure learning. This is key to the outstanding progress that children make. Another reason is that the learning environment both indoors and outdoors is well planned and exciting. Every opportunity for learning is seized upon by the staff and children. For example, physical activities involving throwing balls are combined with mathematics to improve calculation skills. Construction activities are linked to science so that children begin to discover how the slope of a ramp impacts on how fast a ball travels. High expectations by all staff and good relationships with the children mean that there is a calm and harmonious atmosphere in which to play, work and learn. Children greatly enjoy being in this class and their happiness and success are evident. In an art activity chosen by the children themselves, a discussion about their paintings quickly became an impromptu sing-along in which other children joined. This type of atmosphere is a result of the strong emphasis placed on developing children's personal and social skills by the teaching staff. This means that the children behave well and quickly become independent learners. Everyone treats each other with respect and, consequently, children work harmoniously together in a way more usually seen in older, more mature children.

What the school should do to improve further

- Extend the excellent practice seen in many classes so that all pupils know how to improve their work and have opportunities to use this guidance to attain higher standards.

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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?	1
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?	1
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	1
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?	1
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	1

Achievement and standards

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

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	1
The behaviour of learners	1
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?	1
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?	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
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	1
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	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
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

5 June 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Layston Church of England First School, Buntingford, SG9 9EU

Thank you for making us feel so welcome when we visited your school recently. We enjoyed talking to you about what you do in school, looking at your work and watching you learn. You clearly enjoy school and, together with your parents, most of you think that it is an excellent school - we agree.

We were pleased to see how well you get on together. You behave really well and this means that teachers can get on with the job of helping you learn. We greatly enjoyed visiting the Reception class and seeing you take part enthusiastically in an excellent range of activities. I would like to say special thanks to the Year 4 pupils I talked to who told me all about life at Layston.

You told us that you learn a lot in school and really enjoy your work, especially the very good range of school clubs, visits and visitors. We think that your learning is excellent. Your teachers make your lessons interesting and you try hard to do what your teachers ask. Most of you, especially in Year 4, take careful note of and act upon the advice you are given by your teacher. This improves your work. Mrs Sherwood, your excellent headteacher, and her staff constantly try to help you learn as well as possible. We have asked them to give all of you guidance to help you improve your work and opportunities to use this advice to make your work better.

Thank you again for helping us to find out about your school. We hope that you will continue to listen carefully to your teachers and to work hard to achieve as well as you can.

Yours faithfully

Colin Henderson

Lead inspector