



The Acorns, The Acorns

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 134866
LEA Cheshire
Inspection number 283643
Inspection dates 26 September 2005 to 27 September 2005
Reporting inspector Mrs Margot D'Arcy CfBT Lead Inspector

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

Type of school	Primary	School address	Pooltown Road
School category	Community		Ellesmere Port
Age range of pupils	3 to 11		Cheshire CH65 7ED
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	0151 355 1546
Number on roll	341	Fax number	0151 350 6460
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mr M Nield
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable	Headteacher	Mrs A Whitley

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by a team of three additional inspectors.

Description of the school

This large school was formed in January 2005 through the amalgamation of separate neighbouring infant and junior schools. The former headteacher of the junior school was appointed headteacher of the new school. The school is situated in an area of social and economic disadvantage. An above average number of children are entitled to free school meals. Most children are of white British heritage and very few are learning English as an additional language. The percentage of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above average. When children start nursery, their standards are generally well below those expected for their age. The school houses a local authority speech and language centre for children aged 7 to 11. In its short history, the Acorns has already been successful in achieving the Inclusion Kitemark.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The school judges itself to be good. Whilst inspectors agree that it has several significant strengths, improvements are needed in some important areas. As a result, its overall effectiveness is judged to be satisfactory.

The school is highly successful in promoting children's personal development. Standards in this area are outstanding. Provision for the care and safety of children is also outstanding. Children with learning difficulties and disabilities are provided for very well and make good progress. There are weaknesses, however, in the progress made by many children in the infants who do not attain high enough standards in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. The small minority of children learning English as an additional language make good progress. In the juniors, children make satisfactory progress in English and good progress in mathematics but their progress in science is inadequate. Overall, higher attainers do not achieve as well as others and girls do not do as well as boys.

Teaching and the curriculum are satisfactory, with some good and outstanding features. Provision for nursery and reception children is satisfactory. The headteacher and management team are working hard to deal with the many challenges arising from the amalgamation. However, at this very early stage in the school's development, there has been too little time to make an impact on some key areas, such as standards and progress in the infants. The school is strongly committed to giving all children an equal chance to achieve. It has the capacity to improve and provides satisfactory value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and achievement in reading, writing and mathematics for children in the infants by ensuring consistently good quality teaching and good promotion of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum.
- Raise standards and achievement in science throughout the school by ensuring that teaching, the curriculum and assessment systems promote children's capability in scientific investigation.
- In planning for improvement, provide a sharper focus on exactly how standards and achievement will be raised for all pupils and for particular groups, including higher attainers and girls, and how success will be measured.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Children in the Foundation Stage (nursery and reception years) make satisfactory progress. However, by the end of the reception year many have still not attained the nationally expected standards. By the end of Year 2, standards in reading, writing and mathematics are well below the national average. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress in Years 1 and 2, but many other children do

not progress as well as they should. When children begin Year 3, many have difficulty recording their work or reading information. Many are insecure in their knowledge of numbers.

By the end of Year 6, standards in English are well below the national average but, given children's starting point in Year 3, most make satisfactory progress. In Years 3 to 6, children with learning difficulties achieve particularly well owing to good quality support. Progress in mathematics is good because of good teaching. Standards in science are significantly lower than the national average and children do not achieve as well as they should. Past test results in all three subjects show that higher attainers mostly do not make as much progress as other groups of children. The 2005 results show good improvement for this group but in too many lessons higher attainers are not adequately challenged and make insufficient progress.

It was not possible to find any difference in provision for girls and boys, although test results show significant underachievement of girls. The statutory targets that are set for Year 6 children to attain in the national tests are sufficiently challenging.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Personal development and well-being are very successfully promoted by the school and are outstanding. Children's excellent behaviour, enthusiasm in lessons and mature approach to understanding people's differences and dealing with conflict, result in well-rounded individuals by the end of Year 6. These attributes provide a very secure platform from which children might 'take off' and make great strides in their academic learning. They work hard in lessons and behave extremely well even when teaching lacks challenge and some quickly finish tasks that are too easy for them.

Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those in the speech and language centre, learn to value their own and others' achievements. This is due to very good support from teaching staff who constantly promote their self-esteem. As such, these children feel successful, enjoy learning and make good progress. More proof of children's enjoyment of school is seen in the attendance figures which have recently 'shot up' in response to decisive action from the school. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Children's involvement in initiatives, such as a scheme to help others with their concerns, and in charitable projects gives them a real sense of making a positive contribution to society. The school council helps children gain experience in the need to consider and respect others' views. Children's appreciation and respect for world and local cultures is developing well thanks to a very good range of learning opportunities.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall, with some good and outstanding teaching observed across the school. Strengths include the teaching of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those in the speech and language centre. All support staff are deployed very well and contribute significantly to children's progress.

In the best lessons, learning is good because teachers plan work that caters for the full range of children's needs. However, in too many lessons there is inadequate challenge for higher attainers, preventing them from attaining as well as they might. There are weaknesses in the way that science is taught, with insufficient opportunities for children to be actively involved in conducting investigations. The system for assessing children's progress in English and mathematics is satisfactory but that in science lacks rigour and limits opportunities for teachers to help children develop their skills. Information and communications technology (ICT) has a high profile and is taught effectively in many subjects.

In the best lessons for nursery and reception children, adults provide good support, promoting children's language development and their active involvement in tasks. Those learning to speak English as an additional language are well included and supported. Although no inadequate teaching was observed in nursery or reception, there are occasions when children spend too long without direct support from adults. When this happens they lose concentration or forget what they should be doing, which limits their progress.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The school provides a satisfactory curriculum that meets statutory requirements. Planning for English and mathematics provides a satisfactory basis for children to acquire the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, but in science there are too few opportunities for children to practise key skills. High quality individual education plans for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities support teaching staff very well in their work. Whilst some additional activities are provided for gifted and talented children, the range of work planned to challenge higher attainers is insufficient. There is a good programme of work to promote children's health and safety. The school is actively seeking the Healthy Schools Award and provides learning experiences that help children understand how to adopt a healthy lifestyle. For instance, visitors from a well-known supermarket have talked to children about the benefits of eating fruit and vegetables. Children have also been involved in discussions with canteen staff about providing healthy eating options at lunchtime and recycling waste. Extra-curricular activities include music, dance, pottery, a variety of sports activities and residential visits for children from Year 2 upwards. They are well attended.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

This aspect of the school's work is outstanding. All staff are trained and knowledgeable about child protection procedures. Learning mentors have received advanced training in these procedures and have also worked very successfully with parents and children to improve attendance. They play a central role in supporting children who are vulnerable, both socially and academically, helping them to cope with varying situations and to feel included in school life. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported extremely well. For instance, those who attend the speech and language centre join classes for some lessons and so feel part of the school. There are good systems to help the youngest children settle in school and the oldest children make their move to high school. Some outstanding work is done to promote children's understanding of how to stay safe. This includes playground friends (where older pupils befriend younger ones) and peer mediators (where trained children listen to concerns expressed by other children and work with them to help sort out their problems). Lessons in personal and social education have focussed on topics such as bullying and racism, and children have been taught how to deal with such issues. In discussions, children expressed much confidence in teachers' support should they be troubled about anything. One child summed this up very simply by saying 'We trust our teachers'.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Inspectors' judgement of satisfactory leadership and management differs somewhat from the school's evaluation that this area is outstanding. Inspectors acknowledge that there is good and outstanding work being done in some important areas. However, the school is at a very early stage of development and the impact of leadership and management on raising standards is not yet apparent. The school's improvement plan is comprehensive but does not prioritise well. This, and subject action plans, recognise the need to improve standards, but do not clarify how this will be measured. Moreover, some key areas of underachievement, for example, in science and in relation to the performance of higher attainers and girls, are not identified sufficiently well. These limitations make it very difficult for the school and governors to accurately evaluate just how successful they have been in making improvements. This is reflected in the accuracy of the school's self-evaluation, which is somewhat more positive than inspectors' judgements.

The headteacher has been very successful in establishing a committed team and is making good headway on developing whole school policies and systems. The performance of staff is being monitored effectively, with some useful intervention in the infant department to improve provision. Governors fulfil their responsibilities satisfactorily. They have a wide range of experience and hold discussions with coordinators to learn about the school's work. Some visit lessons. They are well aware of the school's strengths and some of the areas that need to improve. In a variety of

ways, the school ensures that governors, parents and pupils are involved in its process of self-evaluation.

Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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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?	3	NA
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	NA
The quality and standards in foundation stage	3	NA
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	NA
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	Yes	NA
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	No	NA

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	NA
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	NA
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	NA
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	NA

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	NA
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	NA
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	NA

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	NA
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	NA
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets, through quality assurance and self-review	3	NA
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	NA
How effectively and efficiently resources are deployed to achieve value for money	3	NA
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	NA
The adequacy and suitability of staff to ensure that learners are protected	Yes	NA

The extent to which schools enable learners to be healthy	
Learners are encouraged and enabled to eat and drink healthily	Yes
Learners are encouraged and enabled to take regular exercise	Yes
Learners are discouraged from smoking and substance abuse	Yes
Learners are educated about sexual health	Yes
The extent to which providers ensure that learners stay safe	
Procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements	Yes
Risk assessment procedures and related staff training are in place	Yes
Action is taken to reduce anti-social behaviour, such as bullying and racism	Yes
Learners are taught about key risks and how to deal with them	Yes
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution	
Learners are helped to develop stable, positive relationships	Yes
Learners, individually and collectively, participate in making decisions that affect them	Yes
Learners are encouraged to initiate, participate in and manage activities in school and the wider community	Yes
The extent to which schools enable learners to achieve economic well-being	
There is provision to promote learners' basic skills	Yes
Learners have opportunities to develop enterprise skills and work in teams	Yes
Careers education and guidance is provided to all learners in key stage 3 and 4 and the sixth form	NA
Education for all learners aged 14–19 provides an understanding of employment and the economy	NA

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Thank you all so much for your help with the inspection. We thoroughly enjoyed our visit because everyone was so helpful and friendly. We would like to share with you what we thought about your school.

These are the things we thought were good.

- Your behaviour is excellent. You enjoy lessons and really try hard to do well.
- You are friendly and caring to each other and happily take on responsibilities.
- Your school makes sure that those of you who sometimes find it hard to learn get really good help.
- Your school looks after you well and teaches you how to stay safe and keep healthy.
- Your headteacher and all of the staff work hard to give you all a good chance to take part in the variety of things that are going on in school.

We know that everyone wants to do even better and we have suggested a few things that we think will help.

- We want children in Years 1 and 2 to do even better work in their reading, writing and mathematics.
- We want junior children to have more opportunities for practical work in science so that you can reach higher standards in this subject.
- Your headteacher and other managers are trying hard to improve so many things for you all so quickly. However, we think it would be better for them to concentrate on just a few very important things to help all of you do as well as you can.

We hope that you will carry on enjoying lessons and make your new school an exciting and happy place to learn.