

Inspection of a good school: The Firs Lower School

Station Road, Ampthill, Bedford, Bedfordshire MK45 2QR

Inspection dates:

8 and 9 March 2023

Outcome

The Firs Lower School continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils enjoy coming to school. They feel happy and safe as all staff care about pupils' well-being. Pupils learn about tolerance and respect and how to stay safe. If they have any worries, pupils can put these in the 'worry monster' or speak to a member of staff who will always help. This includes any instances of bullying, which are extremely rare.

Pupils learn the same behaviour routines and know when teachers need their attention. They follow these routines, so learning is very rarely disrupted. Pupils who need it, get additional support to help them learn successfully.

Leaders have high expectations for pupils' education. Children in early years participate in high-quality learning through their play. This is less developed in the outdoor area of the pre-school. Pupils read regularly and become fluent readers. Leaders engage with parents and involve them in supporting pupils reading. Pupils learn an interesting and engaging curriculum, but this is less developed in a minority of subjects.

Pupils get a number of 'wow' experiences, such as residential trips, visits to a cathedral and graduation from the pre-school. Pupils are proud of the range of leadership roles they undertake, such as 'Firs Ambassadors'.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Pupils study a broad and balanced curriculum. Leaders have made improvements since the previous inspection. For example, pupils now have rich opportunities to work scientifically. They get to make predictions and conduct experiments to test them. Leaders have further developed other subjects and embedded effective teaching in English, mathematics and science. Pupils build their understanding of important knowledge effectively over time. For example, in mathematics, they learn about the basics of number first, so they can apply this knowledge to using money. However, in a minority of subjects, leaders have not developed the curriculum to the same extent. Pupils do not build the same depth of understanding. In these subjects, the important knowledge that pupils

should learn has not been identified or precisely ordered so that pupils' understanding builds over time.

Knowledgeable teachers provide clear explanations and use examples, so that pupils understand important concepts. They regularly check what pupils know. They provide either further support or additional challenges to meet pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils keep up with learning, achieve well and produce high-quality work in most subjects.

Children in early years experience a rich learning environment. Skilled staff plan purposeful opportunities for learning around children's interests. Leaders have effectively developed a new pre-school, which builds on the established good practice in Reception. However, the outdoor area of the pre-school does not give children enough high-quality learning opportunities.

Leaders ensure that all pupils learn to read fluently. From as early as pre-school, children are introduced to books, stories and the basics of sounds. Pupils read books that are closely matched to the sounds they learn. They gain early confidence with reading. Staff regularly listen to pupils read and continuously assess whether they need extra help or are ready to move on. This ensures that pupils keep up, rather than fall behind. Older pupils develop their comprehension through reading a range and variety of texts. Most pupils develop a love of reading. They are encouraged to read regularly. However, leaders recognise that a broader range of books would develop this further.

Teachers have set clear routines and expectations for pupils' behaviour. This includes in early years, where children share and take turns. Behaviour is typically calm and orderly. However, some pupils think that sports games at lunchtime are the main source of any disagreements. Leaders are addressing this through increased supervision.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) have their needs effectively identified and reviewed. They are included in lessons and receive the adaptations they need to access the same learning as their peers. Consequently, pupils with SEND learn well.

Pupils have a rich and varied range of broader experiences. There is a well-planned programme of personal development that links to the school's 'developing me' theme. Pupils learn about British values, including democracy and treating others with tolerance and respect. This is brought to life through real experiences, such as charity collections for those impacted by war and choir performances at local residential homes. Pupils with SEND are included in leadership opportunities, such as helping with assemblies.

The school is led and managed well. Leaders engage effectively with staff with regard to workload and well-being. Staff are positive about the training and support they receive from leaders. They appreciate that leaders work collaboratively with them.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders have ensured that a caring culture has been established across the school, one in which pupils feel comfortable sharing their feelings.

Staff have received appropriate training, so they are able to identify where pupils might be at risk.

Leaders have established effective relationships with agencies such as social workers and the police, to ensure that pupils get the support they need. Leaders act on concerns promptly and record actions taken accurately.

Leaders have established suitable safer recruitment procedures. They have reviewed these carefully and are making changes to refine and improve them further.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders have not planned a minority of foundation subjects to the same level as the rest of the curriculum. The important knowledge that pupils need to learn and the order in which they should learn it have not been as carefully identified. As a result, the depth of what pupils learn and the quality of work they produce is not to the same standard as the rest of the curriculum. Leaders need to ensure that they identify precisely the important knowledge that pupils need to know and the order in which it should be taught in all subjects.
- Leaders have developed provision in the new pre-school by using models of good practice from Reception. However, this is not fully embedded in the outdoor areas of the pre-school. As a result, in the outdoor area of pre-school, children do not always have enough high-quality learning opportunities. Leaders need to ensure that in the pre-school, adults plan learning activities in the outdoor area that are of the same high quality and effectiveness as in the rest of the provision.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in November 2013.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

Unique reference number	137756
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	10255219
Type of school	First school
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	2 to 9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	263
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Ashley
Headteacher	Adam Campbell
Website	www.firslower.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	13 September 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The Firs is a lower school. Pupils leave at the end of Year 4 and complete the primary phase of their education in middle school.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The school is a single academy trust.
- The school took on leadership of pre-school provision in 2017. A new building for the pre-school has recently been completed.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspector discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and has taken that into account in his evaluation of the school.
- The inspector carried out deep dives in the following subjects: early reading, mathematics and history. For each deep dive, the inspector met with curriculum leaders, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.

- The inspector conducted meetings with the headteacher and deputy headteacher. He also met with members of the governing body and the school improvement partner.
- The inspector spoke to leaders about: provision for pupils with SEND; early years; personal, social, health and economic education; behaviour and attendance; personal development; and safeguarding.
- The inspector observed breaktimes and lunchtimes. The inspector spoke to pupils at these times to gather their views on the school.
- In addition to deep dive activities, the inspector visited lessons in science and reviewed pupils' work in geography and art. The inspector also spent time visiting early years, including the pre-school.
- The inspector explored the school's safeguarding culture through viewing safeguarding records and procedures, meeting with a range of pupils and staff and talking to safeguarding leaders.
- The inspector considered the 133 responses and 90 free-text responses made by parents to the online survey for parents, Ofsted Parent View. The inspector considered 43 responses to the pupil survey and 18 responses to the staff survey.

Inspection team

James Chester, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

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