

The Downs Primary School and Nursery

The Hides, Harlow, Essex CM20 3RB

Inspection dates	27–28 January 2016
Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Early years provision	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The school has improved quickly because the headteacher provides very strong and effective leadership and management. She is supported well by an able team of senior leaders and the governing body.
- Since the previous inspection, leaders have worked together successfully to improve the quality of teaching and to ensure that outcomes for pupils are good.
- Pupils' attainment is rising across the school. They make good progress most of the time.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is now good. Teachers plan interesting work that motivates pupils to try hard and to do their best.
- Early years provision is good. Attainment at the end of the Reception Year has risen sharply in the last two years. Remaining inconsistencies are being tackled rigorously by the strong leader.
- Pupils thrive both socially and academically because they are well looked after and kept safe in a caring environment that puts their needs first.
- The school meets the needs of disadvantaged pupils very successfully, ensuring that they attain at least as well as others by the end of Year 6.
- Pupils are proud of the school and their work. They behave well and thoroughly enjoy school.
- Work in and out of lessons as well as numerous visits and clubs provide pupils with many exciting experiences. These help pupils to learn the importance of tolerance and respect for others.
- Parents are almost unanimously happy with the work of the school, especially the improvements they have seen over the last two years.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- In the Nursery, work does not always take sufficient account of children's starting points.
- Across the school, there are occasions when teachers do not move on the learning of the most-able pupils quickly enough.
- Attainment is slightly lower in writing than in reading. This is because pupils have too few opportunities to practise and improve their skills by writing at length in different subjects.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching in the Nursery so that it is as consistently good as teaching in the Reception classes by ensuring that the work provided for children takes even closer account of what they already know and builds on their prior learning.
- Ensure that teachers plan work that consistently provides the right level of challenge for the most-able pupils and moves their learning on quickly enough when they have grasped a concept.
- Close the gap between pupils' attainment in reading and writing by giving them more opportunities to write at length in different subjects.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The very strong leadership of the headteacher has been instrumental in rapid school improvement since the previous inspection. She is supported well by a comparatively new senior leadership team. Together, they have established a culture where second best is not good enough, reflecting their very high aspirations for both staff and pupils.
- There has been a relentless drive for improvement over the last two years. This has been based on a very good understanding of the main priorities. Leaders have very thorough systems for checking the quality of provision. Where they identify weaknesses they tackle them quickly. They ensure that school policies are applied consistently so that pupils are clear about expectations across the school.
- Teachers are given good support to help them improve. They are set clear targets which are then followed up regularly by leaders to ensure that improvements are being seen and sustained. The headteacher makes good use of support from the local authority or the Harlow Education Partnership to provide additional training or challenge where needed.
- Middle leaders, some of whom are quite new to their roles, have developed their skills quickly and are already playing a good part in identifying next steps and driving improvement. They are beginning to make good use of the wealth of data available to them to check carefully the learning of pupils, but this is not yet consistently strong in all aspects of the school's work. For example, the impact of some measures to improve progress are not always checked with enough rigour to demonstrate their effectiveness.
- The school makes well-considered use of its budget including specific government funding for disadvantaged pupils. There is a very strong and highly effective focus on 'getting it right for the pupils'. Consequently, the pupil premium is used in a variety of ways to help disadvantaged pupils fulfil their potential. For example, additional staff who support pupils' emotional development help to overcome barriers to learning. Disadvantaged pupils who are in danger of falling behind are quickly identified and supported so that they can catch up.
- Good use is made of the extra funding available to promote physical education and sporting opportunities. Pupils enjoy a wide range of clubs and sporting activities and benefit from being taught by a physical education (PE) specialist. Ongoing training as well as the opportunity to work alongside the PE teacher are helping to improve the skills of other staff. Pupils are taught that their health is important and their participation in sports and especially competitions has increased over the last year.
- The curriculum (the topics and subjects taught) meets statutory requirements. It provides pupils with many memorable experiences through clubs and visits. An enjoyment of reading is promoted especially well. However, progress in writing is slightly slower than in reading because there are too few opportunities for pupils to write at length across different subjects.
- The school successfully promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Consequently, pupils from different backgrounds and from different cultures feel safe and secure and mix happily together. Pupils' understanding of British values is evident throughout the curriculum, in displays, assemblies and school policies. Pupils demonstrate tolerance and respect in their words and actions. They have a clear understanding of the importance of trust and democracy.
- Parents are very supportive of the school. They are clear about the impact of senior leaders since the previous inspection. They identify many improvements in the school, typically making comments such as 'The environment, management and attitudes have all improved dramatically' and 'The headteacher has done so much in the last two years and I would recommend the school to anyone!'
- **The governance of the school**
 - The governing body has played a full and valuable part in securing the recent improvements. It is very diligent in ensuring that it fulfils its statutory duties, especially with regard to safeguarding.
 - Governors have been robust when making appointments to ensure that the right people are employed to make sure that improvements are built on further.
 - Governors know the school well. They receive a vast amount of helpful information from the headteacher. They check this thoroughly so they have a clear picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Governors have made a good start to developing their own systems for checking provision by, for example, looking at ways that they can work more closely with subject leaders. They carefully evaluate the use of the pupil premium and school sports funding to check that it is having the desired effect.

- Governors manage the performance of staff, including teachers, rigorously. Decisions and pay increases are based on a broad range of evidence, ensuring that only good performance is rewarded.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Procedures for securing pupils' safety are very robust. For example, leaders worked very closely with contractors to keep pupils safe while recent building work was taking place.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Members of staff get on well with pupils. Teachers' high expectations and their great enthusiasm help to make learning fun. New skills are imaginatively introduced so that pupils are fully engaged. For example, pupils in Year 6 learnt quickly about apostrophes because skills were introduced through an interactive game that was greatly enjoyed by the class.
- Teachers use classroom displays extremely well to motivate pupils and to help them improve. They provide examples of what excellent work looks like, showing pupils what is expected and giving them something to aim for.
- Teachers have a very secure subject knowledge in English and mathematics. This means that they can confidently introduce new skills or knowledge. Their explanations are very clear and they use questioning well to ensure pupils understand what they are expected to learn.
- Reading and phonics (the sounds that letters make in words) are taught well. There has been a very successful focus since the previous inspection on making reading enjoyable. Pupils read regularly to adults, and activities such as 'The Bug Club' and the focus on being 'Super Readers' have a good impact on learning by making reading purposeful.
- Teaching assistants make a good contribution to pupils' learning. They are knowledgeable and well trained and provide good-quality support when working with groups or with individuals, especially the less able or those who are disabled or have special educational needs.
- Across the school, teachers successfully meet the needs of pupils who speak English as an additional language. They help them to improve their speaking skills quickly by, for example, checking that they understand new vocabulary as soon as it is introduced.
- Teachers with specialist skills in subjects such as physical education are deployed well and have a good impact on learning.
- Parents are very pleased with the quality of teaching in the school. They feel that it helps their children to learn well. They support their children by hearing them read and helping them with homework.
- Teachers generally make good use of feedback, such as the marking of work or the setting of targets to help pupils develop a secure understanding of the next steps in their learning, which follows the school policy. Older pupils explain in great detail how they are expected to respond to marking. They are very clear that this has helped them to improve their work. This is less well established in a small number of Key Stage 1 classes, where feedback is not followed up carefully enough by the pupils or teacher.
- Teachers accurately assess pupils' learning and use this information to plan suitable work for pupils. This ensures that there is generally good challenge for the most able. However, occasionally these pupils do the same work as others even when they are ready for a greater challenge or have already grasped a concept.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils develop good personal and social skills because adults expect pupils to be respectful to others and to be kind and caring.
- Pupils thoroughly enjoy school and have positive attitudes towards their learning. They are confident and happy to talk to adults about their learning. They understand the importance of doing well at school and the work they do reflects the pride they take in themselves. They present their work neatly and ensure that the school grounds are kept tidy.
- Nearly all parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, agreed that their children feel safe and are well looked after. Pupils also say that they feel safe and are taught how to stay safe.

- Pupils explain clearly how to avoid dangers when using the internet. They understand that bullying can take many formats. Pupils say, and records confirm, that there is very little bullying but when it does happen it is tackled very quickly. As one pupil commented, 'The teachers always listen to us and they help us if we are worried.'
- The school successfully promotes the development of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development as well as preparing them well for becoming citizens in modern Britain. Pupils have a good understanding of right and wrong and they learn about democracy by voting for school councillors. They happily raise funds for others and show a good concern for those less fortunate than themselves. For example, a pupil has recently been invited to the Houses of Parliament following a very successful fundraising initiative organised with very little adult help.
- Although older pupils keenly take responsibility, this is less well established for younger pupils. The school council, which includes pupils from Year 3 onwards, helps Key Stage 2 pupils contribute to school improvement. Older pupils organise games for others at playtimes and are constantly looking out for anyone who may need help.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils, staff and parents confirm that the good behaviour seen during the inspection is typical. Pupils behave well in lessons and around the school because expectations for behaviour are high and policies are consistently applied.
- School records confirm that incidents of poor behaviour have become increasingly rare over the last two years. Staff ensure that pupils understand the importance of good behaviour, making effective use of the 'Nurture Room' to help those who need it.
- School dinners are very healthy and are greatly enjoyed by pupils. Lunchtimes are calm and harmonious with teachers eating with pupils so that they can reinforce values such as good manners.
- Pupils are polite and courteous and the school is a calm and orderly place. They work hard in lessons because they are excited about their learning. They are keen to do their best, only occasionally becoming fidgety when they are insufficiently involved in class discussions at the start of lessons.
- Attendance is broadly average. The vast majority of pupils arrive at school on time and are ready to learn. Leaders have successfully reduced absenteeism over the last two years by working closely with outside agencies to support families. Leaders make good use of the pupil premium to improve attendance by, for example, paying for some pupils to attend breakfast club each morning.

Outcomes for pupils

are good

- Pupils make good progress across the school, developing new skills and understanding quickly most of the time. Pupils are well prepared both socially and academically for the next stage of their education.
- Pupils' attainment is improving across the school and was above average in reading and mathematics at the end of Year 6 in 2015. While Year 2 attainment in 2015 was below average, this reflected good progress from their very low starting points at the end of the Reception Year. The current Year 2 are already working at higher levels than last year's cohort and across Key Stage 1 pupils are now making good progress.
- The school ensures that all pupils do equally well. Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs make good progress. They are given good-quality support that helps them to acquire new skills quickly. There are well-tailored programmes for pupils with especially complex needs that cater successfully for their social, emotional and academic development.
- Disadvantaged pupils also make good progress. The success of the school's strategies to support these pupils is seen in national test results at the end of Year 6 in 2015, with disadvantaged pupils having higher attainment than other pupils in the school and all pupils nationally in reading, spelling, grammar and writing. In mathematics, they attained as well as others both in the school and nationally. Leaders are very proactive in providing additional support outside lessons for disadvantaged pupils where needed, but better outcomes for these pupils are being achieved first and foremost through good teaching in class on a daily basis.
- Pupils from minority ethnic groups or with English as an additional language make the same good progress as others.

- Across the school, pupils read confidently and for a range of purpose. This is supported through frequent reading and a successful focus on ensuring that pupils develop a love of reading. Pupils have a good knowledge of phonics, with most reaching the expected level in national screenings by the end of Year 2 in 2015. Pupils, including those who find reading more difficult, use their phonics skills confidently to break down words and to help them to read.
- Pupils' attainment across the school is slightly lower in writing than in reading. There is a strong and successful focus on teaching punctuation and grammar, but there are too few opportunities for pupils to write frequently at length in order to practise and improve further their writing.
- The most-able pupils usually make good progress. Teachers generally provide the most able good challenge but occasionally their learning is not moved on quickly enough because they do the same work as others or are not given harder work when they have already grasped a concept.

Early years provision

is good

- Early years provision has improved rapidly since the last inspection and is now good. Although there remain some inconsistencies between the quality of provision in the Reception classes and the Nursery, these are being tackled with urgency by the leadership team. The early years leader has an accurate view of the strengths and areas for improvement and has high aspirations for children across the early years.
- Children are well prepared both socially and academically for life in Year 1. When children enter the Nursery, very few are working at a typical level of development for their age. Children's attainment by the end of the Reception Year has risen sharply over the last two years. In 2015, the proportion reaching a good level of development was broadly average, reflecting good progress for pupils in all areas of learning. An above-average proportion also reached higher than expected levels of development for their age, reflecting the good levels of challenge teachers provide for the most able.
- Children make especially strong progress in the Reception classes. Teachers and other adults have a good knowledge of the curriculum and of how young children learn. They plan interesting and stimulating activities both indoors and outdoors that fully engage children and make learning fun. Adults work well as a team to check that all children are doing well enough and they respond quickly if they see a child who is struggling with their work.
- Adults ensure that there is a good balance between work that is led by the teacher and opportunities for children to explore ideas for themselves. When children are working independently, adults in the Reception classes are skilled at stepping in at just the right moment to move learning on to the next stage. For example, as children were exploring the properties of ice by pouring ice cubes, adults used questioning well to help them develop an early understanding of volume.
- In the Nursery, work is interesting and there is a successful focus on supporting children's social and emotional development so that they settle quickly and are happy. However, work is not always adapted well enough to take account of children's different starting points or needs so that they can make good progress all of the time.
- In both the Nursery and Reception classes, children's behaviour is good. They work and play together well, demonstrating good personal and social development. Children concentrate well and follow happily the well-established routines for the school day.
- Children in the early stages of learning to speak English as an additional language are given good support, especially in the Reception classes. They quickly learn new vocabulary and make the same good progress as others over time.
- There are good systems for checking children's progress and for checking their attainment on entry to the Nursery or Reception classes. Learning journals are precise and give a clear picture of progress over time. Support for disadvantaged children is well targeted and gives them a good start to their education.
- Parents are involved in many aspects of their child's education. They are very positive about the quality of provision. For example, one commented that 'We are delighted with the progress our child has made in his Reception year.' Parents support the school well by providing valuable information before children enter the setting, and during home visits.
- Child protection and safeguarding arrangements are thorough. There are no breaches of welfare arrangements. Adults are very knowledgeable about the needs of the children and ensure that they are kept safe. There is a good focus on teaching about health and hygiene. For example, the importance of wearing the right clothes when working outside is constantly being reinforced by all adults.

School details

Unique reference number	115016
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	10001922

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	367
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Paul Adams
Headteacher	Elisabeth Gelston
Telephone number	01279 445538
Website	www.downs.essex.sch.uk
Email address	admin@downs.essex.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	23–24 October 2013

Information about this school

- This is a larger-than-average-sized primary school. Children in the early years are taught in two Reception classes and a Nursery. Only half of children in the Nursery class transfer directly to the Reception classes with the others going to different schools.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is above average.
- Around one in five pupils speaks English as an additional language. The most common home languages for these pupils are Urdu, Romanian and Polish.
- The proportion of pupils supported by the pupil premium is above average. This is additional government funding provided to give extra support to looked after children and those pupils known to be eligible for free school meals.
- The headteacher took up post in September 2014. Several senior leaders were newly appointed at the start of the academic year.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress in reading, writing and mathematics for pupils in Year 6.

Information about this inspection

- The inspectors observed pupils' learning in 19 lessons, over half of which were observed jointly with the headteacher or an assistant headteacher. In addition, the inspectors made some short visits to observe learning at other times.
- Discussions were held with pupils, staff, a representative from the local authority and members of the governing body.
- The inspectors took account of the views of 24 parents and carers who responded to the online questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors also talked with parents and carers at the start of the school day.
- The inspectors heard pupils read and looked at a number of documents, including: the school's own information about pupils' learning and progress; planning and monitoring documents; the school development plan; records relating to behaviour and attendance; safeguarding information; and health and safety documentation.
- The inspectors analysed responses to inspection questionnaires from 27 members of staff and 40 pupils.

Inspection team

Mike Capper, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Joanna Jones	Ofsted Inspector
Susan Cox	Ofsted Inspector

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