

Thomas Gray Primary School

Chestnut Grove, Bootle, Merseyside L20 4LX

Inspection dates

27–28 February 2019

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Staffing turbulence, including in leadership, and weaknesses in teaching have hampered leaders' and governors' work to maintain a good quality of education since the previous inspection.
- Staffing is now more stable but senior leadership is not strong enough as too much rests on the shoulders of the headteacher.
- Pupils' progress over time has not been strong, including that of disadvantaged pupils. Standards at the end of key stages 1 and 2 are lower than average as a result.
- Currently, the quality of teaching is variable and support staff are still developing their skills.
- Opportunities for pupils to write at length or apply reasoning when solving problems in mathematics are inconsistent across the school.
- Although staff are vigilant and pupils are kept safe and free from harm, governors do not routinely ensure the accuracy of statutory safeguarding records or website information.
- In lessons, some teachers do not routinely move learning on once new learning has been grasped. At other times, work does not challenge the most able or tackle gaps in learning caused by previous poor teaching.
- Despite leaders' concerted efforts, attendance remains low.

The school has the following strengths

- The well-planned curriculum excites pupils and broadens their horizons and aspirations.
- Leaders' actions are strengthening current pupils' progress, particularly in reading.
- Caring staff provide exciting learning opportunities for children in the early years.
- Pupils are happy, feel safe and behave well in this welcoming, inclusive school community.
- Funding for disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) supports pupils' personal development well. Leaders' actions are also beginning to bring about improved academic outcomes for these groups.
- Pupils whose circumstances might make them vulnerable are very well cared for.
- Safeguarding is effective.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further improve the quality of teaching so that pupils make consistently good progress from their starting points, particularly in writing and mathematics, by making sure teachers:
 - make the best use of time in lessons and move learning on once concepts have been grasped
 - provide more opportunities for pupils to write at length and build up their resilience as independent writers
 - provide work that challenges pupils, particularly the most able
 - continue to develop pupils' ability to reason and solve problems in mathematics
 - eradicate remaining gaps in learning caused by earlier weaknesses in teaching.
- Continue to strengthen the impact of leadership and management by:
 - increasing teachers' expectations of the progress required to close gaps in learning
 - continuing to diminish the gaps between the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils and those of other pupils nationally
 - further developing teaching assistants' skills in leading small-group work
 - ensuring that governors check that the single central record is kept up to date
 - making sure that information on the school website is accurate
 - governors taking prompt action to strengthen senior leadership further.
- Further improve attendance rates and reduce the number of pupils who are regularly absent.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- In the years since the previous inspection, leaders and governors have not maintained the good performance of the school. The quality of leadership, teaching and pupils' outcomes have faltered.
- Since the previous inspection, the school has experienced a number of staffing difficulties which have slowed the school's improvement journey. However, the dedicated headteacher has been successful in maintaining the morale of the staff team through some trying times.
- Staff are ambitious for the school and its pupils. Supported by the local authority, leaders and governors have taken determined steps to improve the work of the school. The quality of education provided is now moving in the right direction but weaknesses remain.
- Pupils' progress is inconsistent across year groups. The proportion of pupils working at or beyond the standard typically expected for their age varies across the school. At times, pupils capable of working at the higher standard are not doing so, because they are not challenged well enough to help them show a deeper understanding of their learning.
- Checks on the quality of teaching ensure that the headteacher knows where teaching is effective and where it needs improving. Targeted training is provided to sharpen teaching skills and improve teachers' subject knowledge.
- A detailed tracking system helps school leaders keep a careful check on how well pupils are doing in all subjects. An overview of pupils' achievement and an update to the school's improvement plans are shared with governors following termly reviews of pupils' progress. This ensures that the governing body has an accurate view of the school's performance.
- The curriculum is enriched by an extensive range of additional activities, such as residential experiences and visits linked to many subject areas. The school offers a range of well-attended after-school clubs.
- Thomas Gray is an inclusive school. Leaders ensure that pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted well through assemblies, classwork and the school's daily routines. As a result, pupils show well-developed levels of understanding of global and local issues and British values are promoted well.
- The additional funding for disadvantaged pupils is deployed well to support pupils' emotional, social and personal development. However, although improving, the progress of disadvantaged pupils is still not as strong as that of other pupils nationally.
- The leadership and provision for pupils with SEND has been strengthened this year. Extra staff time is enabling leaders to identify the precise needs of these pupils. Increasingly well-targeted teaching, including in small groups, is beginning to help pupils with SEND to make stronger progress than in the past.

- Leaders spend the physical education and sports funding wisely. Pupils commented positively to inspectors on the range of sporting activities available to encourage them to keep active.
- Fixed-term exclusion rates have been much higher than the national average for a number of years. The school has worked successfully with pupils who sometimes find it difficult to behave well. Exclusion rates have fallen as a result.
- Attendance rates are improving because of the many effective actions introduced by school leaders. Some pupils who have poor records of attendance are collected by the school's minibuses each morning, for example.
- Parents and carers, including those responsible for children looked after, hold highly positive views of the school. They think that their children are happy, kept safe and well cared for and inspectors agree with this view. The school has a well-deserved reputation in the local community for the careful and sensitive way it supports pupils' personal, social and emotional needs.
- The school is an active member of the Strand cluster of local schools. For example, staff regularly share training opportunities with colleagues in other schools in the cluster.
- In 2017, the local authority identified concerns about aspects of the school's performance. A range of support to improve teaching and learning has been provided since that time, which has strengthened subject leadership and brought about improvements in the quality of teaching. In February 2019, the local authority judged that, although some weaknesses remain, staffing in the school is now more stable and the school has the expertise to improve itself.

Governance of the school

- The local authority has strengthened the membership of the governing body since the previous inspection. Governors know their roles and responsibilities well and deploy their skills effectively to provide support for school leaders.
- Governors are highly committed and ambitious for the pupils and families that make up the Thomas Gray community. They have a precise understanding of the barriers to learning that face some pupils, including those who are disadvantaged. Members of the governing body make regular visits to find out first hand about school life and they receive detailed information from the headteacher and other leaders about pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching. As a result, governors are well informed and able to hold leaders to account for the school's performance.
- Governors work with senior leaders to ensure that pupils are kept safe. However, checks made on the single central record are not thorough enough to ensure that all the required elements are kept up to date.
- Governors have not ensured that the school's website contains accurate information about the progress made by pupils or provides up-to-date information about the curriculum for parents.
- Governors are aware that, for a significant period of time, much of the senior leadership of the school has rested on the shoulders of the headteacher. The leadership team has been strengthened by a number of recent appointments.

Governors are currently seeking to support the headteacher with the appointment of a permanent deputy headteacher.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- There is a strong culture of safeguarding at Thomas Gray. The school provides a very caring environment for its pupils. Senior leaders recognise the challenges faced by pupils, including those whose circumstances might make them vulnerable, and take steps to ensure that they stay safe.
- Leaders ensure that staff receive up-to-date training on all aspects of safeguarding. Staff are vigilant and understand that keeping pupils safe is everyone's responsibility.
- Pupils feel safe. They feel confident in raising concerns with staff. In lessons and through regular assemblies led by staff and pupils, they learn how to keep safe. During the inspection, for example, pupils who are trained as digital leaders led an assembly for other pupils about recent concerns raised in the media about the safe use of the internet.
- The school site is secure. The identity of visitors is checked fully by office staff.
- Any safeguarding issues are recorded carefully and records are kept safe and secure.
- Aspects of the single central record which were incomplete at the start of the inspection had been resolved before the inspection concluded.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment has not been good enough over time to ensure that pupils achieve as strongly as possible across all subjects. Leaders, governors and staff are taking determined steps to improve the quality of learning for pupils. Teaching is improving but some inconsistencies remain.
- Teachers now plan engaging and exciting activities to introduce new topics and develop learning in all subjects in the curriculum. A rich range of visitors to the school and trips within and beyond the local community capture the imagination of pupils and make them want to find out more. However, work set does not always tackle gaps in learning created by previously weak teaching or stretch and challenge the most able to deepen their thinking so that they reach their full potential.
- There is a positive climate for learning in all classrooms. Pupils try hard and are keen to please their teachers. Relationships between adults and pupils are warm and mutually respectful. Teachers and other adults know pupils well as individuals.
- Where teaching is strongest, teachers use effective questioning to tease out understanding and identify misconceptions. They make sure that pupils understand that errors and misconceptions are an important part of learning. They provide clear explanations and move learning on quickly once concepts have been grasped so that little learning time is lost and pupils make as much progress as possible in lessons. At times, however, teachers repeat content which has already been understood rather than moving learning on. As a result, pupils' progress sometimes dips.

- Senior leaders have introduced a consistent approach to developing writing across the school. Pupils' grammar, spelling and punctuation skills are stronger as a result. However, at times pupils' progress in writing is hampered because they do not have enough opportunities to develop the resilience to write independently and at length.
- Leaders' focus on improving handwriting and the presentation of work is bearing fruit. Much of the work on display around the school shows that many pupils take great pride in their efforts and are able to produce neat, well-presented work. Work in pupils' books shows that this aspect of learning is improving noticeably, although a few inconsistencies remain, mainly in topic books, which can sometimes be untidy.
- Pupils' work and observations of learning show that their basic mathematics skills are being developed increasingly well. Teachers have begun to develop pupils' ability to reason and solve problems but this is at an early stage in some classes.
- The teaching of early-reading skills is becoming increasingly effective as a result of training and support provided for teaching assistants. Children in the early years and pupils in key stage 1 recognise letters and know the sounds that different letter combinations make. They use this knowledge to work out unfamiliar words. Older pupils, particularly those in upper key stage 2, read with increasing fluency. They talk enthusiastically about the different types of books they read and many say how much they enjoy the way that teachers share books with them which are linked to topic work.
- The work of teaching assistants has been refocused to provide additional support for small groups of pupils. They are still developing their skills in managing this aspect of their work. However, the progress of pupils who need extra help to overcome gaps in learning, including that of those who are disadvantaged or have SEND, is beginning to strengthen as a result of their input.
- Pupils enjoy the many trips and visitors to the school that help bring the curriculum to life. One recent example is the work the school is doing with Chester Zoo to find out more about palm oil and the sustainability of the planet.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils are proud of their school. They enjoy being part of the happy, harmonious community at Thomas Gray. Pupils of all ages get on well together.
- Pupils say they feel safe. Incidents of bullying are rare. Pupils know that should issues occur these should be reported straightaway so that adults can deal with any issues promptly.
- Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep themselves healthy and safe both in the school and in the local community. The curriculum helps pupils to understand how to be physically healthy. They know the importance of eating healthily and the need to be physically active.

- Pupils are encouraged to be caring, thoughtful individuals through the school's approach to social and emotional development. Displays encourage pupils to 'fill each other's buckets' with kind acts and the tree of kindness celebrates the actions of those who have helped others.
- Pupils feel they can make a positive contribution to the life of the school. Those with school responsibilities take their roles seriously particularly those who act as school councillors or digital leaders.
- Leaders' checks on the learning taking place across the school take pupils' opinions into account. Subject leaders regularly interview small groups of pupils to seek their views of the curriculum and their lessons.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- In class and around the school, pupils conduct themselves well. They listen well to teachers and other adults and respond quickly to questions and instructions. They work cooperatively with each other and enjoy learning.
- Pupils socialise well around the school and in the playground, where the atmosphere is happy and friendly. New pupils make friends quickly and pupils welcome everyone to their school.
- Work in books shows that many pupils have positive attitudes to learning and take a pride in presenting work well, although a few do not always do their neatest work in topic books.
- School rules and reward systems are clear and understood well by all. Pupils think staff apply the rules fairly and all are keen to gain rewards, such as cinema trips, for positive behaviour.
- Pupils who find it difficult to manage their own behaviour are helped to do so skilfully by staff. The school adheres firmly to its behaviour policy when deciding if a pupil requires excluding for a limited period. Clear induction procedures are in place to ensure a smooth return to school for pupils who have been excluded.
- Although attendance rates are improving, and despite the concerted efforts of leaders and staff, too many pupils still do not attend the school regularly.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Outcomes require improvement because pupils' progress is uneven across the school. From low starting points, pupils do not consistently make enough progress from their starting points to at least reach the standards expected for their age.
- At the end of key stage 2 in 2018, there was an improvement in pupils' progress in reading but progress in writing and mathematics remained well below the national average.
- Standards at the end of Year 6 in 2018 were lower than average in all subjects and particularly so in mathematics. Only a quarter of pupils reached the standard for their age in reading, writing and mathematics combined. This is much lower than the 64%

national average. Few pupils reached the higher standard at the end of key stage 1 or key stage 2 in any subject in either 2017 or 2018.

- Actions taken to improve the teaching of spelling, grammar and punctuation paid dividends at the end of key stage 2 in 2017 with standards in this measure rising to in line with the national average. This standard was maintained in 2018.
- Progress in reading is beginning to improve for disadvantaged pupils. In 2018, the progress of disadvantaged pupils in Year 6 was in line with the national average. However, progress in writing and mathematics remains low for this group and their attainment in all subjects lags behind that of other pupils nationally. Very few disadvantaged pupils are working at levels beyond what is expected for their age.
- Inspectors considered the school's own data, which shows the impact that the high proportion of pupils with SEND in some classes has on the results of national assessment. Inspectors' scrutiny of pupils' work and of the school's assessment information indicates that most pupils currently in the school are making better progress in English and mathematics than seen previously. This is the result of the support provided by leaders and improvements to teachers' subject knowledge. However, there is still variability in progress across key stages 1 and 2, due to inconsistencies in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The strongest progress is in Year 6, where, in reading, writing and mathematics, more pupils are working at the level expected for their age than seen previously.
- Across the school, the most able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, do not consistently make the progress of which they are capable. This is because the work set, including in subjects other than English and mathematics, is not always sufficiently challenging. As a result, too few of these pupils reach standards beyond those expected for their age in any subject.
- The proportion of pupils attaining the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics check in 2018 was broadly similar to the national average. This is an improvement on the significantly low levels seen the previous year.
- The needs of pupils who join the school at other than the usual time are identified quickly and their progress can be rapid from their starting points. Pupils who have been at the school for most of their education generally reach higher standards than those who join at other times.
- Leaders have taken steps to boost the progress of pupils with SEND. Small-group work tailored to their particular needs and the support they receive in class are helping these pupils make stronger progress from their starting points.
- Pupils' progress in the foundation subjects such as history and geography is improving due to teachers' stronger subject knowledge and raised aspirations of what pupils can achieve. However, the most able do not reach their full potential in all subjects.

Early years provision

Good

- Children join the school with skills often well below what is typical for their age. Self-help, communication and language skills are often particularly weak. Children, including

those with SEND and those who are disadvantaged, make at least good progress from their starting points throughout their time in early years because of good teaching.

- The high number of pupils with SEND in some year groups can affect comparisons with national data and must be treated with caution. For example, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development and who are well prepared for their move to Year 1 at the end of Reception is generally a little lower than the national average. This is despite the good progress made in all areas of learning including reading, writing and mathematics.
- The needs of children with SEND are identified quickly and a range of support is provided. Funding is deployed effectively, for example to provide regular speech and language support for children with particular needs in this area of development.
- Routines are well established and are understood and followed by children. A strong team of teachers and teaching assistants ensure that children, including those who attend the two-year-old provision or join the school at other than the usual time, settle quickly and feel safe and secure. Safeguarding and welfare requirements are effective and children's personal, social and emotional development is strong.
- Children are happy and behave well because of adults' high expectations. Older children share their toys and resources readily and sustain their concentration both when working on their own and with others.
- The curriculum for early years is planned carefully. It captures and motivates children's imagination and is regularly adapted to follow their interests. There are many different opportunities for children to have fun as they learn. During the inspection, children searched with great excitement for a penguin that had paid a secret visit to the early years classrooms and left clues for them. Reception and Nursery children eagerly used aerial photographs as they explored the school grounds. They were able to spot local landmarks like the railway line next to the school.
- Children's vocabulary and speech and language skills are often below what is typical for their age when they join the early years. Adults carefully encourage children to talk about what they are doing and model the type of language to be used as they play. Adults check regularly how well children are doing and adjust learning accordingly.
- Basic reading, writing and mathematics skills are developed well, particularly when children work in small groups led by adults. However, at times adults do not challenge the most able children so that they make the best possible progress.
- The learning space for the two-year-old provision is calm and well organised. Patient, caring staff ensure that the learning and personal and welfare needs of individual children are met well. Relationships are strong and children relate well to all adults. Learning is carefully linked to children's interests and needs. It is adapted promptly as children engage with the resources available. During the inspection, for example, children happily used a range of musical instruments to 'perform' on the outdoor stage.
- Parents hold positive views about the quality of teaching and the way staff care for their children. They like the way they are invited to read with their children at the start of the school day.
- Leaders and other staff work closely with parents to encourage children to attend school regularly. However, absence rates are still too high in the early years. Some

children are not developing the good attendance habits they need to help them be successful throughout their school life.

- Staff are skilful at encouraging children to develop as independent learners. However, on occasion adults stand back when a timely intervention would move children's learning on more quickly. Leaders and other staff know that with even greater challenge some of the most able children are capable of doing even better.
- The experienced early years leader provides effective leadership and management for the knowledgeable and committed team of teachers and teaching assistants.

School details

Unique reference number	134785
Local authority	Sefton
Inspection number	10082091

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Maintained
Age range of pupils	2 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	273
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Pam Taylor
Headteacher	Rachael Rimmer
Telephone number	01519 223 723
Website	www.thomasgrayprimary.co.uk/
Email address	admin@thomasgrayprimary.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	10–11 March 2015

Information about this school

- Thomas Gray Primary School is an average-sized school. The number of pupils on roll has risen steadily since the previous inspection. The proportion of girls who attend the school is higher than the national average.
- The pupil population is becoming more stable. However, some classes in upper key stage 2 have an above-average number of pupils who joined the school at other than the usual time.
- The large majority of pupils are of White British heritage.
- The school has established part-time provision for two-year-olds since the previous inspection.
- The school provides flexible nursery provision. Children attend the Nursery class part time and full time. Children attend the Reception class full time.

- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is more than double the national average.
- The proportion of pupils with SEND is high.
- Since the previous inspection, the school has experienced turbulence in staffing. A number of staff have joined and left the school and a number of staff, including members of the senior leadership team, have experienced lengthy periods of absence. The Year 6 teacher is currently acting as deputy headteacher following the resignation of the previous post holder in December 2018.
- A number of governors have joined the governing body since the last inspection.
- The local authority issued a notice of concern about the performance of the school in January 2017. This was rescinded in February 2019. The local authority has arranged support for the school since the previous inspection.
- The school is a member of the Strand cluster of schools. The headteacher chairs this group.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning throughout the school. A number of observations were undertaken jointly with the headteacher.
- Inspectors checked the safety of the school premises at different times of the school day. They observed arrangements for pupils' arrival at school.
- The inspectors talked with pupils informally as they played at breaktimes. They visited the dining hall at lunchtime and observed pupils' behaviour as they moved around the school. They met formally with four groups of pupils.
- Inspectors looked at examples of pupils' work and talked to them about it. They listened to pupils read and observed the teaching of reading skills.
- Inspectors held a number of meetings with the headteacher to consider her view of the school and the school's plan for improvement. They spoke with senior leaders and met with middle leaders and other members of the school's staff.
- An inspector met with the chair of governors and two members of the governing body.
- An inspector met with a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors spoke to parents at the start of the school day. They took account of 13 responses to Ofsted's online survey (Parent View) and five comments provided for inspectors. Inspectors spoke to a parent on the phone. Inspectors also took account of 26 responses to the staff questionnaire and to the school's most recent surveys of pupils' and parents' views.
- Inspectors examined a range of documents, including information about pupils' progress, the quality of teaching, school-improvement plans and external reviews of the school. They reviewed the contents of the school's website and scrutinised records relating to behaviour, attendance and safeguarding completed by school staff.

Inspection team

Lyn Pender, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Schelene Ferris	Ofsted Inspector
Christine Howard	Ofsted Inspector

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