

The St Christopher School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115385
Local Authority	Southend-on-Sea
Inspection number	357748
Inspection dates	22–23 November 2010
Reporting inspector	Trevor Watts

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Foundation special
Age range of pupils	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	184
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	1
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Purkis
Headteacher	Jacqueline Mullan
Date of previous school inspection	15 January 2008
School address	Mountdale Gardens Leigh-on-Sea SS9 4AW
Telephone number	01702 524193
Fax number	01702 526761
Email address	office@tscs.southend.sch.uk

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by three additional inspectors. They observed 27 lessons, involving 22 different teachers and other class leaders. Meetings were held with pupils, school leaders, members of the governing body and other staff. Inspectors observed the school's work and scrutinised school documents, including those relating to safeguarding, the curriculum, leadership and management, and monitoring of teaching and learning. They analysed 78 responses to the parental questionnaire and responses received from 85 pupils and 66 members of staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following.

- Are school leaders, including the governing body, middle managers and subject leaders, effective in raising standards of achievement?
- Are all groups of pupils making appropriate progress, bearing in mind their widely differing ages, difficulties and needs and the changing nature of the school's pupil population as increasing numbers of pupils with behavioural difficulties are admitted?
- Considering that they are very few in number, do students in the sixth form benefit from appropriate and distinct teaching and curricular opportunities?

Information about the school

This school is larger than average for a special school. It admits students with a range of special educational needs and/or disabilities. More than half have autistic spectrum disorders, but since the previous inspection there are increasing numbers who have behavioural, social and emotional difficulties and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Others have severe learning difficulties. All students have a statement of special educational needs and the great majority are boys. The proportion known to be eligible for free schools is well above the national average. The proportion from minority ethnic groups is well below the national average and a small number speak English as an additional language. A small proportion of pupils are looked after by their local authority.

Sixth form provision has been established since the previous inspection. Since that time, there has also been a considerable amount of new building and re-building work which is due to be completed in 2011. The school is a specialist school for communication and interaction. It has specialist trust status for 'promoting the needs and understanding of young people' with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in the community and provides outreach support and advice for staff in many local schools. An extended after-school club helps some pupils to develop social skills and gives respite provision for several hours each evening. There is a separate boarding facility (Christopher's Cottage) on the same site. This is sometimes used by a small number of pupils from the school for respite care. It was the subject of a social care inspection in July 2010 and was reported to be good. All of the national minimum standards were met.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

This is a good school. Pupils' learning in lessons is good, leading to good progress and achievement. They are happy to come to school, as evidenced by their above average attendance, and they behave exceptionally well. Pupils make particularly good progress in developing their social and communication skills, and in their concentration. Teachers focus on these areas because they are most fundamental to pupils' needs, and the school's specialist status makes a major contribution to these aspects of pupils' development.

The focused monitoring of teaching has enabled senior leaders to identify staff training needs. Courses and training events have improved the accuracy of assessment and ensured that teachers plan a wide variety of relevant activities that reflect pupils' prior attainment and give them the right degree of challenge to promote their learning. The care with which activities are adapted to the needs of individuals is seen in the outstanding curriculum. This is greatly enhanced by the exceptional range and quality of partnerships with other establishments. These operate to the mutual benefit of all concerned, as the school is a provider as much as a beneficiary of the links. The effectiveness of the innumerable links with parents is similarly outstanding, as is the care, support and guidance that the school provides. The increasing number of pupils with behavioural difficulties has led to some changes in the curriculum and teaching methods throughout the school. When the new building is opened, it is expected that there may be a significant increase in pupil numbers, including those who have behavioural difficulties. The school is beginning to consider the implications of this, and has already successfully established a 'nurture group' for some pupils, to help them to settle in and restart their learning. Staff training, class organisation and resourcing needs remain to be considered in detail.

The school is led and managed well. The headteacher's drive and sense of purpose have motivated staff and the governing body through some difficult times since the previous inspection. Everyone has coped extremely well with many disruptions caused by multiple phases of the refitting and extensions to the premises, with all the organisational, financial and noise implications involved. The school has seen the successful establishment of a sixth form which admits a small number of students from other schools as well as from this school. They undertake a valuable 'transition' course to improve their social and communication skills before going on to college. Members of the governing body have started to become much more involved in challenging what the school is doing. Targets in the school's development plan and questionnaire returns from staff, nevertheless, indicate that the role and value of the governing body is not well known. The leadership team has been expanded considerably into three tiers of management, and staff are beginning to develop their new roles, although this is at a relatively early stage. The school's success in improving the quality of the curriculum and several aspects of care, leadership and

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management to an outstanding level is a result of the dedication and skill shown by staff and members of the governing body. It is also an indication of the school's good capacity to improve further and to face the challenges that a changing and expanding pupil population are bringing.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Develop and embed the effectiveness of the school's leaders, especially by:
 - enabling senior leaders and subject managers to develop their roles more quickly
 - raising the profile of the governing body so that staff are more aware of who the members are and what they do for the school.
- Plan and prepare for anticipated changes in the school, particularly:
 - the expected increase in pupil numbers when the new building is completed
 - the changing nature of pupils' needs if the proportion of pupils with attention deficit and behavioural difficulties increases.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

The good outcomes for pupils are the result of their good progress in developing a mixture of personal, social and academic skills. This includes the small number of girls in school, pupils who are looked after by their local authority, those who are of minority ethnic heritage and those for whom English is an additional language. All groups of pupils make good progress according to the nature and extent of their special educational needs and/or disabilities. The youngest pupils, for example, all have autistic spectrum disorders and have difficulties relating to each other and adults, but they quickly settle in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 classes. During the inspection, they were seen to sit together, watch the teacher, answer simple questions and point to their name or photograph when learning about the day's activities. Pupils who have challenging behaviour learn to control and manage their own responses, avoid stressful situations, pay attention and work together in class. More-able pupils develop good learning skills and have achieved well in six different GCSE subjects, several gaining C grades in the most recent examinations. They also succeed in 'short course' GCSEs, Entry Levels and Silver Challenge Awards through the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN). All pupils who have left at the end of Key Stage 4, or after a period in the sixth form, have gained accreditation and successfully transferred to college.

Many pupils are confident, capable and happy to speak about their work, how the school has helped them and what they expect to move on to in the future. They say they feel extremely safe in school at all times and their parents strongly support this. The great majority have an excellent understanding of how to live a healthy life. They are thoughtful about what they eat and drink, things to avoid and the exercise and sport they take part in. The behaviour of virtually all pupils is exceptionally good. They do their best to consider each other's needs and difficulties, and there is no indication of any disruptions to lessons. Many pupils support each other in class, and help others, by, for instance, delivering registers, doing tasks in the school's garden and allotment, being on the school council, raising funds and collecting goods for a homeless shelter. Learning right from

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wrong, how to behave, how to work and play together and understand each other's differences are major successes for many pupils.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	*
Pupils' attainment ¹	
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

* In some special schools inspectors do not make a judgement about attainment in relation to expectations of the pupils' age.

How effective is the provision?

Teachers and their teaching assistants carefully record how well pupils are making progress and plan subsequent activities that maintain the good pace of learning. They teach enthusiastically and have positive, amicable relationships with their pupils. They maintain a high level of challenge during lessons and often provide valuable summaries of what is being learned. Staff make good use of resources, especially those that aid communication, including electronic white boards and computers. The well-focused teaching motivates pupils to be attentive in lessons and to enjoy their tasks, whether they involve, for instance, developing their stamina and fitness in a football training class, or entering and analysing data on a computer spreadsheet.

The strength of the curriculum lies in its outstanding suitability for all pupils to develop well, regardless of their learning needs. Staff have designed courses, lessons and individual activities that give a strong level of challenge and motivation for all pupils. These include, for instance, additional communication skills for some pupils, while others

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work in groups or pairs to help them to relate to each other. The school's specialist status for communication and interaction is a major factor in developing staff expertise and resources for pupils in this school. It also greatly benefits staff in many other schools through its outreach support, open days and workshops. Some pupils have work experience days in cafes, shops and other schools, while yet others have college courses that link with their in-school studies. There are many opportunities to enjoy lessons with pupils in other schools, such as for music or by taking part in concerts and sports events. There are many trips, for instance, to churches, a synagogue, farms and parks. After school, there is a host of clubs to enhance pupils' learning, although some are not always well attended. They include such activities as sports, games, cookery and computing.

Pupils are outstandingly well cared for and kept safe. They are confident that they can speak with staff if they have any problems. Agencies such as Mencap, the Connexions partnership and the Children's Disability Team work effectively to enhance pupils' learning and well-being. This adds to the very effective work of the school's own team of speech and language therapists. The extended evening club gives effective support to families in need of respite time.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The commitment and energy of senior leaders have helped to create a school with clear aims and a team of staff that is very supportive of the drive for improvement. The many developments since the previous inspection are also partly due to the good and increasing involvement of the governing body which recently, for instance, challenged school leaders about some of the self-evaluation judgements. School leaders ensure that welfare and safeguarding arrangements are outstandingly secure. The school uses an integrated computer system to ensure that all procedures are kept fully up to date and are accessible to all staff and the governing body. Child protection, in particular, is exceptionally comprehensive in its thoroughness and clarity of practices and has been shown to be very secure for safeguarding pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Staff make sure that pupils have full equality of access to all aspects of the curriculum, through adaptations to activities and extra support carefully tailored to their needs. Leaders make good use of the available data to ensure that all groups of pupils are progressing appropriately and that there is no discrimination of any kind.

The outstanding links with parents and outside agencies have worked in both directions, with the school being a leader in some fields and supporting many other local schools, especially in training and advising staff about autism and attention deficit and

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hyperactivity disorder. Pupils attend lessons, workshops and work experience in other schools, colleges and places of employment. In its turn, the school is a magnet for many students from several colleges, a university, local schools, a school of nursing, and police and social care training centres. These links contribute greatly to the school's increasing drive to promote community cohesion. Pupils accept each other very amicably and learn about different customs and the lives of other people through the curriculum and a range of visits locally. Pupils have raised money for several international charities; some have visited the Anne Frank museum in Amsterdam and staff have had some initial contacts with schools in China and Ghana.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Early Years Foundation Stage

The Early Years Foundation Stage makes good provision for children, all of whom have autistic spectrum disorders. They share classes with Key Stage 1 pupils of similar abilities and needs. This works effectively, allowing children to settle down together and begin to learn well. They achieve well, especially in developing social, behavioural and communication skills, and begin to develop relationships with others. The teaching is good, being well based on accurate assessments of children's skills when they are admitted, and on continuing assessment of their progress afterwards. Through this, lesson activities and the curriculum are individualised for each child's needs and aptitudes. These include regular opportunities to take part in activities in the outdoor area, the school hall, swimming pool and in other classes. Teachers use a good selection of resources to enhance children's learning, and they have frequent visits to local places on interest, such as a butterfly farm and the seaside. The provision is managed well by a capable and experienced team under the enthusiastic and knowledgeable leadership of a senior member of staff.

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These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage	2

Sixth form

The school makes good provision for the very few students in the sixth form, from this and other schools, who need additional support for their communication and social skills. The principal aim is to build up their skills so that they can join a college of their choice. The success rate is good and all students have been admitted to their chosen college since this provision began. The teaching and curriculum are personalised closely to the individual needs of each student. This may include one-to-one activities, small groups or time spent in a class with pupils from Key Stage 4, such as for information and communication lessons or personal and social activities. The provision is led and managed well by a senior member of staff and the teaching, by a small and capable team is good. Students enjoy their learning and speak in glowing terms of their experiences and what they want to go on to do next.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2

Views of parents and carers

The great majority of parents and carers who responded to the questionnaire were very supportive of all aspects of the school. One parent's comment was typical of many, 'We are so happy we got our son a place here.' Another said, 'This school has transformed our child into a mature and happy fifteen-year old young man.' Others noted how their children are 'absolutely thriving', 'making excellent progress' and 'improving in leaps and bounds'. Inspection findings endorse these positive views.

Only a very small number of parents and carers expressed any concerns. The inspectors discussed these with senior staff and looked at documents such as newsletters, details of workshops for parents, letters and reports, and concluded that the school is normally

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extremely effective in the information, guidance and assistance it offers to parents and carers.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at The St Christopher School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 78 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 184 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	45	58	31	40	2	3	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	51	65	25	32	1	1	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	49	63	29	37	0	0	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	48	62	26	33	3	4	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	56	72	20	26	1	1	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	40	51	32	41	3	4	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	38	49	37	47	1	1	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	37	47	34	44	1	1	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	49	63	26	33	2	3	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	47	60	27	35	1	1	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	43	55	30	38	4	5	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	52	67	22	28	1	1	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	58	74	19	24	0	0	1	1

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	58	36	4	2
Primary schools	8	43	40	9
Secondary schools	10	35	42	13
Sixth forms	13	39	45	3
Special schools	33	42	20	4
Pupil referral units	18	40	29	12
All schools	11	42	38	9

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 March 2010 and are the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn and spring terms 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



24 November 2010

Dear Pupils

Inspection of The St Christopher School, Leigh-on-Sea, SS9 4AW

I am sure that many of you will remember when the inspectors visited your school recently. We would like to thank you for making us feel welcome in your lessons and for talking with us and showing us your work.

We found that you go to a good school. A lot of excellent things happen there. Your teachers make sure that their lessons are difficult enough to encourage you to work hard and learn new things every day. They make lessons interesting and you enjoy your learning very much, whether it is in the sports hall, the computer room or taking part in musical activities. The other adults in your lessons do a lot to assist you in understanding new ideas. They also help you to learn how to make friends and behave well. After school, there are lots of different clubs that some of you go to, including one that keeps going until seven o'clock in the evening. Many of you join in activities at other schools, such as for sports, music and the recent performance of 'Beowulf', as well as having trips out to the seaside, cafes and shops. We found that your headteacher, other senior people in school and the governing body all work very hard to make things right for you. The building work, the new nurture group, the sixth form and new ways of planning lessons have been big jobs for everyone, and you have done very well to put up with all the noise from the places where the building is going on.

We have asked the school's leaders to keep planning for how things can become even better, and how to get people to see how much work the governing body really does to help. We found that school leaders could spend some more time thinking about how things will change when the building work is finished and how to organise things for the new pupils who will come to school. You can help by continuing to work hard and behave well in lessons and around school, both now while the building work is going on, and afterwards when more pupils will be coming to your school.

Yours sincerely

Trevor Watts

Lead inspector

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