

St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided First School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	122311
Local Authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	359220
Inspection dates	20–21 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Derek Neil

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	5–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	126
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr James Kavanagh
Headteacher	Mrs Patricia Telfer
Date of previous school inspection	19 September 2007
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. They observed seven lessons taught by six staff. They held meetings with groups of pupils, members of the governing body and staff. They observed the school's work, and looked at a range of documents including policies related to safeguarding, assessment data and the school development plan. The inspection also considered 59 questionnaires from parents and carers as well as questionnaires completed by pupils and staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- Attainment in mathematics.
- The accuracy of the school's self-evaluation.
- The improvements since the previous inspection.

Information about the school

In this small school, the proportions of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals, of those from minority-ethnic groups and of those who speak English as an additional language are all below average. Although the percentage of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is below average, the proportion with a statement of special educational needs is high. The school has the Activemark, Healthy School Status, and Basic Skills and Gold No-Smoking awards.

A nursery school on the same site is subject to a separate inspection.

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. It has improved considerably since the last inspection and now has many strengths. Communications with parents and carers, a concern in the past, are now outstanding. One parent, reflecting the views of many, summarised the situation, 'The school has made huge improvements to creative teaching, communications and the building. I am very happy with the education and care my children receive.'

Children enter the school in the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills that are slightly better than expected for their age. They make good progress and leave school attaining levels that are above average. They do particularly well in reading and writing because this is where the school has focused its attention. Pupils' personal development is good. They enjoy school, particularly the opportunities it offers for physical and sporting activity, which support their excellent understanding of how to stay healthy. Their contribution to the school and local communities is outstanding. Many hold positions of responsibility and during the inspection they all played an important part in the funeral of the parish priest. The rate of attendance is high and rising. Pupils develop into very confident, articulate and contented young people, and this, together with their good literacy and numeracy skills, prepares them extremely well for the next stage of their education. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good overall, although they have only a limited understanding or experience of the range of different cultures in Britain. These good outcomes are largely due to the excellent care, guidance and support which the school provides and the good curriculum.

The school has made significant improvements to teaching and assessment. Lessons give pupils opportunities to be active in class, and work is designed to make learning enjoyable. Occasionally, pupils do not make as much progress as they could because the pace is too slow or the work is not challenging enough.

The previous inspection report revealed weaknesses in the school's self-evaluation and its improvement plans. Leaders now undertake a comprehensive range of activities, such as observing lessons to get a better knowledge of the school. They have implemented effective plans to bring about the recent improvements. Self-evaluation, however, still tends to be over-generous in some respects and improvement plans do not focus enough on the impact they are intended to have on pupils' achievement. Nonetheless, the school has come a long way in recent years and has good capacity to improve further.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - accurately identifying weaknesses as well as strengths in self-evaluation

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- considering in lesson observations the level of challenge provided and the progress made by pupils
- focusing improvement plans on pupils' achievement.
- Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring that lessons are well paced and provide sufficient challenge for all pupils.
- Develop the pupils' awareness and experience of the range of different cultures in Britain.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

Pupils generally make good progress in class although occasionally, when they spend too long on one activity or when the work is too easy, their progress slows. They enjoy lessons, concentrate well and try hard to succeed. When given the chance to work independently they show good levels of maturity. In a Key Stage 1 lesson, for example, a small group played a game of word bingo for a lengthy period and required very little supervision; they organised themselves to take turns as the caller and found their own solutions to dealing with words they could not read. Pupils appreciate the opportunity to make their own decisions about activities. For instance, in a Key Stage 2 mathematics lesson, one group enjoyed devising their own criteria for classifying animals in a Carroll diagram. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress, particularly in English, because of the well-informed support they get from teaching assistants in class and the special programmes that are used out of lessons to improve their basic literacy.

Pupils' enjoyment of school is reflected in their very high rate of attendance. They behave well in lessons and around the building. They show consideration and respect for others. They know how to stay safe and show good awareness of the dangers of the internet. Their enthusiasm for physical activities contributes greatly to their extremely healthy lifestyle. When the school opened a gymnastics club, it was rapidly oversubscribed. When discussing a fund-raising event, the school council chose to support the British Heart Foundation by organising a Skipathon. Pupils contribute significantly to the school community by taking on roles such as house captain and fruit monitor.

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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	2
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	2
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	1
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

How effective is the provision?

Relationships in class are very good. Teachers use praise effectively to build up pupils' confidence and encourage them to try hard. They present the work in a lively way and their enthusiasm is passed on to the pupils. They often prepare an interesting stimulus to capture pupils' imagination at the start of a sequence of lessons. For example, pupils in one class were surprised to receive a letter from a pirate telling them he had stolen and hidden their chairs; this was intended to initiate a class discussion and inspire a story. Lessons are well planned. Teachers have clear objectives and prepare a variety of activities designed to ensure pupils enjoy and are interested in the work. For much of the time the pupils are actively participating; for example, during whole-class sessions on the carpet the teacher often asks pupils to discuss questions with a partner or to prepare an answer on a mini white board. Occasionally, however, an activity goes on for too long or the work is not challenging enough for some of the pupils and, as a result, pupils make less progress than they should.

The broad and balanced curriculum enables all pupils to achieve well. Staff are tailoring the content and teaching approaches to meet the needs and interests of individuals. Some imaginative planning enables pupils to develop their basic skills in different subjects. For example, a science topic dealing with the function of muscles supported pupils' skills in literacy and information and communication technology: pupils designed a game to exercise certain muscles and scripted an advertisement for the game, which they filmed

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and put onto the school's website. The curriculum is enriched by visitors to the school, visits to places of interest, and by a good range of well-attended extra-curricular activities.

The school has a well-developed system for assessing pupils' progress, setting them targets and checking how well they are doing. Pupils' work is marked regularly and thoroughly, often with helpful guidance about how to improve, particularly in English. However, teachers do not pay enough attention to correcting spelling errors and pupils do not always learn from the feedback they get. Pupils are very well cared for. Those returning a questionnaire were unanimous that adults cared about them. They are extremely well supervised throughout the day. Staff know them well and understand their needs. One parent, typical of many, wrote that her children had different needs, 'which have been met beyond my expectations'. Staff provide sensitive support for pupils experiencing emotional problems at school or at home.

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	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

Much-improved systems for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school have resulted in leaders' better knowledge of its strengths and weaknesses and effective plans for developing the curriculum and teaching strategies. Staff work well as a team, committed to raising standards and making lessons interesting. Self-evaluation still tends to be over-generous and assessments of teaching that has been observed by managers do not sufficiently consider the progress made by the pupils or the level of challenge presented.

The governing body provides appropriate support. Members fully understand their responsibilities and carry out useful activities, such as observing lessons that enable them to acquire first-hand knowledge of the school. The governing body has been instrumental in improving communications with parents and carers, which have been strengthened considerably; the parental questionnaires were almost unanimous in their support for the school. Arrangements for safeguarding the pupils meet requirements and the school has adopted some recommended practice. Staff are well trained and have a good understanding of the issues. The school's detailed assessment data contribute to its excellent work promoting equal opportunities: careful analysis of the data enables leaders to demonstrate that all groups of pupils are achieving equally well. Leaders have robustly reviewed their provision for community cohesion and developed a strategic plan for its further improvement. The plan successfully focuses on the strengths within the school, local community and pupils' global awareness. It does not, however, consider sufficiently how to develop pupils' awareness of other cultures in Britain.

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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	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Views of parents and carers

The great majority of parents and carers who returned questionnaires were positive about all aspects of the school. Their almost unanimous agreement that they are well informed about their children's progress and that their suggestions and concerns are taken seriously demonstrates the considerable improvements the school has made in its communications with them. Several parents and carers wrote favourable comments about the care their children receive. A few expressed concerns but these showed no common trend apart from a small number who felt their children were not challenged enough. The inspection confirmed that at times work for pupils could be more challenging.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided First 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 59 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 126 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	35	59	22	37	1	2	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	47	80	12	20	0	0	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	35	59	22	37	1	2	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	32	54	25	42	2	3	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	33	56	25	42	1	2	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	27	46	30	51	2	3	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	39	66	20	34	0	0	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)	36	61	19	32	0	0	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	34	58	21	36	2	3	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	32	54	23	39	2	3	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	27	46	29	49	2	3	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	31	53	23	39	4	7	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	37	63	20	34	2	3	0	0

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	46	48	6	0
Primary schools	6	47	40	7
Secondary schools	12	39	38	11
Sixth forms	13	42	41	3
Special schools	28	49	19	4
Pupil referral units	14	45	31	10
All schools	10	46	37	7

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 2010 to 31 December 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 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.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

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.



23 June 2011

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided First School, Hexham, NE46 2EE

Thank you for welcoming me and my colleague so warmly into your school when we came to inspect it. I enjoyed watching you in lessons and at play, talking about your school with you and your teachers, and looking at your work. Now I want to share with you what I found out.

You go to a good school. It has improved a lot since the last time it was inspected. The staff take extremely good care of you and I understand why you say you feel safe there. You enjoy your lessons, for which the teachers plan imaginative activities to help you make good progress with your work. You behave well and are very confident and polite when speaking to adults. You learn extremely well how to eat healthily and to take lots of exercise. You make an excellent contribution to society; for instance, the school council has been involved in organising fund-raising events and you all played an important part at the funeral during the inspection.

There are a few things that would make the school even better. I have asked the staff to make sure all your lessons give you work that will help you make even faster progress. I have suggested a different way for managers to look at how well the school is doing and to plan for improvements. I have also asked the teachers to find ways of giving you an insight into the huge variety of cultures and communities that are represented in Britain.

Thank you again for helping me so much. It was a pleasure to meet you. I wish all of you the very best for the future.

Yours sincerely

Derek Neil

Lead inspector

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