

St Nicholas School

Philpott Avenue, Southend-on-Sea, SS2 4RL

Inspection dates 19–20 March 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- The headteacher’s steadfast leadership and insistence on high standards is apparent throughout the school.
- The motivated and hard-working staff work well together in the best interests of the pupils. This means that pupils are able to make good and sometimes better progress from their different starting points.
- Pupils are prepared well for leaving school because of the wide range of work experience opportunities and the chance to take relevant qualifications.
- Parents speak well of the school and the help it gives to them and their children. One said, ‘It gave my son his shine back.’
- The school has effective procedures in place to keep its pupils safe. Its work in e-safety is exceptional.
- The school’s promotion of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural education is particularly strong.
- Governors know the school from top to bottom so they know the right questions to ask the headteacher to help the school improve.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Teachers do not have the opportunity to share what they do best with their colleagues to make sure that all teaching is at least good and more is outstanding.
- The wealth of data the school has collected about how well pupils do is not used as much as it could be to help teachers plan their lessons.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 12 lessons, some of which were seen together with senior leaders. They also visited several classrooms to see what happened on a daily basis, to talk to pupils and look at their work. Inspectors watched pupils arrive at and leave school, joined them at break and lunchtimes and listened to some of them read.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher and other senior leaders as well as teachers responsible for planning how subjects are taught and assessed. Inspectors also spoke to the person responsible for home school liaison, a representative from the local authority, the School Improvement Partner, a group of governors, several pupils and some parents.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documents to do with staff performance, health and safety, child protection, pupils' behaviour, attendance and progress, as well as minutes of governing body meetings and records of school visits.
- There were not enough responses from the online questionnaire for parents, Parent View, to give any information. However, inspectors took note of the school's own recent questionnaire to parents.

Inspection team

Debra McCarthy, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Nicholas Asker

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- St Nicholas School is a small special school which caters for Key Stage 3 and 4 pupils who join the school from other special or mainstream schools.
- All pupils have statements of special educational need for a range of learning needs including cognition and learning difficulties, communication and interaction difficulties and autism spectrum disorder. There have been an increasing number of pupils with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties.
- Pupils attend the school from Southend-on-Sea and neighbouring areas. A few attend from other local authorities.
- Most pupils are White British and all speak English as their first language.
- An above-average number of pupils are eligible for the pupil premium (extra government funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and those looked after by the local authority).
- Pupils in Key Stage 4 attend Writtle College one day a week for work-related courses.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise achievement further by:
 - giving teachers the opportunity to share their best ideas about teaching so that all teaching is always at least good and more is outstanding
 - making sure that teachers have access to the wealth of data about pupils' progress that the school has collected to help them plan pupils' next steps on a day-to-day basis.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Teachers are good at pinpointing pupils' exact starting points so that they can check how well they are doing over time. If pupils are not doing so well, teachers make sure that they get the extra help they need to improve. If pupils are finding work a little too easy, they are given harder work so that they are stretched to do better.
- The school compares pupils' work with that of pupils from other special and mainstream schools to ensure that the way teachers mark pupils' work is accurate.
- The information the school has collected about pupils' progress shows that most pupils make at least good progress from the point at which they join the school. Some do even better, especially in developing their social and emotional skills.
- Generally, there is little difference between achievement in different subjects or between groups of pupils, such as those with autism spectrum disorders or social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The special 'nurture group' provides a safe, secure setting to help pupils with particular difficulties to thrive.
- Senior leaders see to it that pupils are doing equally well in all subjects. They noticed that pupils were not doing as well in science as they were in other subjects so that they made changes to how science was taught. Consequently, last year, the results in science were much better.
- Senior leaders' checks also identified the need to develop reading and creative writing across the timetable so that now pupils are able to practise and improve these skills in a variety of different contexts, such as the specially developed 'creative writing room'.
- The school is very careful in the way it uses its pupil premium funding specifically to help those pupils who are eligible to receive extra support. It is equally careful in the way it analyses how well these pupils are doing and has got a lot of information about their progress. This information shows that these pupils are doing as well as their peers in mathematics and English. In some cases, they are doing better.
- The school makes effective use of its Year 7 catch-up funding to give additional support to those pupils who are eligible to receive it.
- All pupils have the opportunity to take relevant qualifications that will help them move on to college courses or other placements when they leave school, whatever their ability. The school has increased the number of GCSE options available for the most-able pupils so that now they are able to take physical education, mathematics, English and art, with several pupils gaining pass grades.
- Key Stage 4 pupils have the chance to follow courses in practical subjects at a local college, such as animal husbandry, metalwork, woodwork and horticulture, so that they benefit from a good mix of academic and work-related learning. They also have access to a range of work-experience.
- Senior leaders have gathered a wealth of detailed information about pupils' progress which helps them to see how well everyone is doing. However, this information does not always find its way to the classroom to help teachers plan on a practical, day-to-day basis.

The quality of teaching is good

- One of the strengths of the teaching at St Nicholas School is the way in which teachers and support staff work so well together. Everyone knows exactly what they are meant to do so that they can help pupils do their best.
- Support staff use their initiative so that, as well as supporting the teacher, they can pick out pupils who might be having problems with their work and help them to overcome their difficulties. They also know pupils very well so they can quickly find the best way of assisting them.
- The school groups pupils according to their ability and this helps teachers to plan lessons that are suitable for everyone. Some teachers go a little bit further than this so that work is planned on a more individual basis; for example, for those pupils with autism spectrum disorder who may need a more specialised approach.
- Pupils have the opportunity to improve their social and co-operation skills by working together, as was seen in a particularly exciting mathematics lesson. Pupils were predicting what would be the most popular fruit in their school survey. They learnt to record their findings together and adjust their predictions based on changing evidence. 'Strawberries went through the roof', one pupil exclaimed excitedly on finding his prediction was correct.
- Teachers are mostly good at choosing the right questions to check that pupils have understood what they have been taught. Teachers often do not just accept the first thing pupils say but push them a little bit further to make them think about their answers.
- Pupils are very aware of what their targets are and the school has thought of a variety of ways of helping pupils remember them, depending on pupils' ages and abilities. Teachers mark pupils' work thoroughly so they know exactly what pupils have done well and what they need to improve.
- Time is usually used well, such as in one physical education lesson where pupils were continuously involved in a whole range of different activities. Their teacher regularly questioned them about them about what they had learnt, while checking that they were taking health and safety issues into consideration.
- There is a busy, purposeful atmosphere around school during lesson time, with pupils mainly occupied in useful activities that help them learn. Most teachers plan lessons that hold pupils' attention but are also able to be flexible and adjust their plans so that they can change what they do if they think a different approach would be better.
- The very good relationships between staff and pupils contribute to the positive atmosphere in lessons. Generally, pupils want to please their teachers, so that, even when pupils find teaching a little lacklustre, they still usually carry on with their tasks and do as they are asked.
- Senior leaders regularly check to see how well teachers are doing. They know that most teaching is good and that occasionally it is outstanding. They are able to offer useful advice and training to help teachers improve their teaching. However, teachers do not yet have the opportunity to spend time in each other's classrooms to find out what other teachers are doing, so that they can share some of their good ideas and use them in their own teaching.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Behaviour plans for those pupils who struggle with their behaviour are very detailed and provide staff with useful advice.
- Staff work very well together to manage pupils' behaviour, and praise and discipline are used in just the right mix to encourage pupils to behave. Staff have high expectations of behaviour and, because they do not stand any nonsense, pupils generally respond appropriately.
- Information about pupils' behaviour is carefully recorded so that staff know whether it is improving. This information shows that pupils' behaviour does improve over time, both on an individual basis and around the school generally. The number of fixed-term exclusions and detentions has decreased considerably in the last few years.
- Pupils themselves say behaviour is generally good. Although they say incidents sometimes happen, they also say that pupils get a lot of help in managing their behaviour.
- Pupils' attitudes to learning are generally positive and are best where teaching is interesting and engaging. Pupils who have difficulties controlling their behaviour are skilfully helped to get back on track and not disturb others.
- Pupils show a pride in their work, as demonstrated in the care they take over their writing and the neatness in their workbooks. They know that staff are also proud of what they do because displays of their work around the school are so well presented.
- The school counsellor is on hand to help pupils talk through their problems. Specialist areas, such as the 'nurture group', also provide a safe haven for pupils to explore their emotions and feelings.
- The school keeps pupils safe. Staff are well trained. They meet regularly to discuss pupils' well-being. There are well-established procedures for staff to report any concerns they may have about a pupil.
- The school's recent survey of parents shows that they feel their children are kept safe and are well looked after.
- The school's well thought-out programme of personal, social, citizenship and health education contributes to pupils' preparation for life after school and in helping them to understand the changes that occur when growing up. The school organises separate girls' and boys' groups to enable equal support for both groups of pupils.
- Pupils know about the different types of bullying because the school helps them to understand what bullying is and how to deal with it. The school's work on e-safety is both innovative and thorough so that pupils are made very aware of the danger of making 'friends' on social media sites and other hazards associated with using the internet.
- Attendance continues to improve as a result of the school's persistence and continued drive to reduce absenteeism.

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher's steadfast and concerted leadership has identified a clear role for the school amongst the other special schools within the local authority.
- Staff are fully supportive of the school's leadership and are proud to work at the school.
- Parents are very supportive of the school and they are appreciative of the help both they and their children receive. They feel welcome in school and that their views are taken into consideration. They greatly appreciate the help they get in enabling their children attend after-school clubs.
- The school offers pupils a whole range of after-school and lunchtime clubs, from film club to card-collecting clubs. Pupils' time in school is enhanced by outside visitors such as 'The Music Man', who enable pupils to attain qualifications in drumming skills.
- The new approach to the way subjects are taught has led to a more collaborative approach so that more teachers are beginning to plan together. There are many opportunities for pupils to use their literacy and numeracy skills across the whole range of subjects and to practise them in a variety of practical contexts. This approach means that spiritual, moral, social and cultural education is very well planned and is a strength of the school. For example, the recent focus on the Tudors has enabled pupils to look at crime and punishment in Tudor England and relate it to their work on deciding on new school rules, as well as to think about religious freedoms now and in the past.
- Teaching is good and improving as a result of good opportunities for appropriate training and strong management of staff performance by the headteacher.
- Senior leaders know their school well and are aware of the improvements that need to be made. They have a clear picture of the way forward and have put an appropriate plan in place for these improvements happen.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors know the school well because they visit it regularly and talk to staff and pupils. This means that they can double check the information they receive from the headteacher about pupils' performance to make sure that it is accurate. They are very knowledgeable about the link between teachers' performance and their pay.
 - Governors keep a watchful eye on how well pupils are doing and are particularly thorough in checking that the pupil premium funding is spent effectively.
 - Governors are careful to ensure that pupils are kept safe and that all safeguarding requirements are met.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	115444
Local authority	Southend-on-Sea
Inspection number	430794

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	85
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Barry Levitt
Headteacher	June Mitchell
Date of previous school inspection	24 May 2011
Telephone number	01702 462322
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