

St Mary's Infants' School

St Mary's Way, , Baldock, SG7 6HY

Inspection dates 9–10 December 2014

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- The headteacher is a strong and inspiring leader. She is well supported by both the senior leadership team and the governing body. This is a good and improving school because it is well led.
- From low starting points, particularly in literacy, pupils make good progress and reach standards above the national average in reading and writing, and well above the national average in mathematics.
- Pupils behave well and are respectful of adults and each other. They show good manners and are keen to learn.
- Pupils feel safe at school and are taught how to keep themselves safe in a range of situations.
- The quality of teaching is good and improving. Teachers and teaching assistants know each pupil well and use this knowledge to plan appropriate lessons and activities.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage is led and managed effectively. The quality of teaching is good and children make good progress in the Reception class. They are prepared well for Year 1.
- The school has a strong Christian ethos but is also welcoming to, and inclusive of, other beliefs and cultures. Pupils are taught to value other people and to be thoughtful and considerate.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Standards at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage remain below average overall because some children do not make rapid enough progress in literacy to reach a good level of development.
- The teaching of phonics is not consistently good.
- Although disadvantaged pupils make good progress, this is not rapid enough to enable them to catch up with their peers.
- Day-to-day assessment is not as effective as it could be because the purpose of some activities has not been made clear to pupils and, reflecting this, the marking comments are too general to be helpful.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors gathered a range of evidence to judge the quality of teaching and learning. They observed parts of 13 lessons throughout the school, some jointly with the headteacher.
- Inspectors looked at pupils' exercise books, listened to pupils read and talked to them about their work. Inspectors examined the school's documentation on pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching.
- The views of parents were taken into account, including: 38 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire; informal conversations in the playground; one letter that was received; two parents who met with an inspector; and one parent who spoke to an inspector on the telephone. Inspectors also listened to the views of staff and evaluated the 15 staff questionnaires that were received.
- Meetings were held with pupils, staff, parents, governors and a representative of the local authority. Inspectors looked at a range of school documents, including information about safeguarding, the school's self-evaluation, and attendance and behaviour records.

Inspection team

Wendy Varney, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Marion Cannie

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- This infants' school is smaller than the average-sized primary school. There are two classes per year group from Reception to Year 2. The Early Years Foundation Stage admits pupils, full-time, in the September following their fourth birthday.
- About a quarter of pupils are disabled or have special educational needs. This is well above the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who are eligible for the pupil premium (27%) is similar to the national average. The pupil premium provides additional government funding for those who are known to be eligible for free school meals and children in the care of the local authority.
- Most pupils (89%) are White British and there are no other significant ethnic groups.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters represent) so that that all pupils make rapid progress by ensuring that:
 - all staff enunciate clearly and use 'pure sounds' when teaching pupils to blend words to read and segment words to spell
 - new sounds and spellings are always taught clearly and explicitly, and that pupils are given enough opportunities to practise them both orally and in writing.
- Raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils further by using a wider range of strategies to meet the specific needs of individual pupils.
- Further develop the use of assessment by ensuring that objectives for lessons focus on what teachers intend pupils to learn, and that the marking of work reflects this focus.
- Continue to raise standards in the Early Years Foundation Stage so that more children make rapid progress in literacy and a higher proportion reach a good level of development.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- This is a good and improving school. The headteacher has a very clear vision for the school and has gained the trust of the whole school community in the two years that she has been in post. She is very well respected, both personally and professionally, and parents were keen to tell inspectors how important it is to them that the headteacher takes a personal interest in all the pupils attending the school. Her good leadership encourages an environment where the expectation is that pupils will behave well and that teaching will constantly improve.
- The headteacher is supported by a knowledgeable and experienced senior leadership team that shares her vision for the school. They work well together and their strong focus on improvement means that teaching is getting better and standards overall are rising. Performance management is used well to ensure that teaching continues to improve. For example, performance management arrangements for teaching assistants are well developed and their work is increasingly effective as a result.
- English and mathematics are well led and standards are improving overall. For example, standards in mathematics were well above the national average in 2014, despite the fact that a significant proportion of pupils had additional needs that affected their learning. Leadership of other subjects is at an earlier stage of development.
- Provision for pupils with special educational needs is well led and managed. The headteacher has made this area a high priority by increasing the non-classed-based Inclusion Coordinator role to full time. The Inclusion Coordinator manages provision effectively.
- The school's curriculum is broad and balanced, covering the full range of National Curriculum subjects. Pupils say that they have 'lovely lessons' and that they are 'learning a lot'. The school organises a range of educational visits that enhance the curriculum and these are valued by pupils. Pupils are taught well about morals and values and they learn the difference between right and wrong. They understand that rules need to be followed and they learn about democracy through the election of the School Council. The curriculum prepares pupils well for life in modern British society.
- Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of, and satisfied with, the school. Responses on Parent View show that 100% of parents would recommend the school to others. Parents value particularly the approachability and friendliness of the staff. Many parents were keen to stress the role of the 'brilliant' headteacher in creating a nurturing and caring environment where pupils achieve well.
- The school's self-evaluation is thorough and informs the school development plan accurately. Although both documents are useful and appropriate, the headteacher plans to make them 'smarter' and more sharply focused in order for these documents to be even more effective.
- Safeguarding arrangements are sound and statutory requirements are met.
- The pupil premium is being used well and disadvantaged pupils make good progress. Even so, the school is aware that a broader range of interventions and resources could be considered to meet individual needs.
- The school has a strong Christian ethos but is also inclusive of, and welcoming to, families with other religious beliefs or none. The school promotes equality of opportunity well, particularly through its strong provision for pupils with disabilities and those with special educational needs. The school tackles discrimination well and pupils are taught to value others.
- The primary physical education and sport premium is being used effectively. The school has employed sports coaches to work directly with the pupils and this has raised standards in the subject. Teachers observe sessions led by specialist coaches and this has improved their own teaching practice. An increased

range of clubs has been made available through appropriate spending of the grant.

- The school has worked with the local authority to improve early years provision and has successfully gained its Quality Mark. Termly visits from the local authority improvement partner provide appropriate support to the school.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governance is effective. Governors are very committed to the school and many are long-standing members. They know the school well because they visit often. Governors are very supportive and are increasingly able to ask the challenging questions that enable them to hold the school to account.
 - Governors have a thorough understanding of the quality of teaching in the school because they receive good-quality information from the headteacher. They use the reports from the improvement partner's visits to assure themselves that this information is accurate.
 - Governors receive regular information from the headteacher on the school's performance and they also know about other sources of data. Governors are starting to use data more effectively to hold the school to account. For example, a governor has now been appointed to focus directly on the pupil premium and how well this is used.
 - Minutes of committee meetings show that governors have a good understanding of performance management and the link between pay and performance. The pay and personnel committee is provided with robust performance management information by the headteacher and they use this to ensure that good teaching is rewarded and underperformance is tackled.
 - Governors know about the pupil premium grant and provide sufficient challenge when considering how it is spent.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good; they behave well in class and move sensibly around the school. The school rules are clear and the behaviour management system is applied consistently throughout the school. Pupils understand the card system well and would not want to 'get a red card' because they would not want to disappoint their headteacher.
- Pupils are friendly and welcoming, and show consideration for each other. They display good manners because this is an expectation of the school and something that staff constantly model to them. For example, when writing a letter to Santa, pupils were expected to say 'I would like ...' rather than 'I want'. Parents say that the staff do a lot to instil in the children respect for other people.
- Pupils show good attitudes to learning. Members of the School Council told the lead inspector that they are 'learning a lot' because they have 'lovely lessons' and 'the teachers are nice'. Pupils enjoy the range of educational visits that enhance the curriculum.
- The school has strong systems in place to record and deal with incidents as they occur. There were no racist or bullying incidents in the last two years and there have been no exclusions during the same period.
- Attendance has improved steadily in recent years and is currently above the national average.

Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe, at a level appropriate to their age. For example, pupils understand the reasons that they do fire drills and why they are important. They are taught how to stay safe from injury in physical education lessons.
- Pupils know what bullying is and have been taught that they should tell an adult if anything happens that worries them. Pupils are confident that a teacher would help if someone was nasty to them and they could not sort it out themselves.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teachers know their pupils well and plan work at a range of levels to meet their needs. The work in pupils' exercise books shows that they are challenged appropriately and that pupils are given suitable prompts and support when they are needed. Lessons are prepared well and teachers use a range of strategies, for example, appropriate use of 'talk partners', to ensure that pupils understand what they are learning and that they make good progress.
- The quality of relationships between pupils and staff is a strength of the school. Staff encourage pupils to be reflective thinkers and to be thankful for what they have.
- Teachers manage behaviour very well and this means that classrooms are orderly and calm, enabling pupils to learn. Teachers have high expectations and follow the school's systems consistently. They use praise well to encourage pupils to do their best.
- Teachers and teaching assistants work closely together. Teaching assistants are well trained and have a strong impact on ensuring pupils achieve well. They provide good support for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs, as well as more generally in the classroom.
- Teachers focus well on improving pupils' speech and language skills. Staff routinely check that pupils have understood the language that they use and exploit opportunities to extend pupils' vocabulary well. For example, in a Year 2 lesson about The Christmas Story, the teacher ensured that the pupils understood 'worshipped' and 'ruler' without allowing the telling of the story to be spoilt.
- In some lessons, pupils do not make as much progress as they could because the focus of the learning is not clear. At times, some teachers focus on the task that they want pupils to complete rather than on what they want pupils to learn. For example, 'write about your weekend', gives pupils an instruction but does not focus them on an aspect of their writing to improve. Although exercise books contain good examples of teachers' marking that directly helps pupils to improve, in some cases the lack of a clear focus for the learning limits the effectiveness of the marking, which is too general as a result.
- The teaching of phonics is improving and is usually good, but not yet consistently so. Results of the Year 1 phonics screening in 2014 and inspection evidence show that pupils have not reached the same high standards as in other aspects of their work. In some sessions, pupils do not make as much progress as they could because new sounds and spelling patterns are not taught explicitly enough and pupils are not given enough opportunity to practise them out loud and in writing. In some cases, staff do not say sounds clearly enough or do not correct pupils when they mispronounce sounds.

The achievement of pupils is good

- Pupils enter the Reception Year with skills and abilities that are below those typical for their age. From similar starting points, in 2014, 90% of pupils reached or exceeded the expected level in reading at the end of Key Stage 1, and 83% did so in writing.
- Pupils read widely and often and clearly enjoy reading. The school has invested in additional books to enhance its reading scheme, including subscribing to electronic books that parents and children can access from their computers at home. The school has also introduced more attractive reading records and have worked on raising the profile and importance of reading at home. Pupils' reading record books show that the school's efforts to encourage reading at home are working.
- Pupils make similarly good progress in mathematics. In 2014, 98% reached the expected level at the end of Key Stage 1 and 37% exceeded it.
- More-able pupils make good progress and reach a good standard of attainment. For the last two years, the proportion of pupils who achieved the higher levels was above the national average. The work in pupils' books shows that they are given appropriate challenges and that expectations are high.

- Pupils eligible for the pupil premium make the same good progress as their classmates although their overall attainment remains lower. Standards at the end of Key Stage 1 in 2014, for this group, were affected by the high number of disadvantaged pupils who also had an additional special educational need.
- Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are very well catered for and their progress is monitored closely. These pupils make good progress from their individual starting points.

The early years provision is good

- Pupils enter the Reception Year with skills and abilities below those typical for their age, particularly in literacy. Although they make good progress overall, this is not enough to catch up with their peers nationally, and their level of development by the end of the Reception Year remains below average. This is mainly because not enough children make sufficiently rapid progress in learning to read and write from their low starting points.
- Teaching in early years is good and teachers and teaching assistants work effectively together. The environment is well developed and provides good opportunities for the children in all the areas of learning.
- The deputy headteacher leads early years well and manages the provision effectively. The school has prioritised early years and staffing levels are high. This enables the school to provide early intervention to fill 'gaps' in children's development as soon as they start school.
- The children's individual learning journals are detailed and thorough. They include a wealth of information and track each child's progress clearly. They include contributions from parents and the partnership between home and school is clear.
- There are good transition arrangements in place to ensure that children are well prepared when they enter the Reception Year. Pupils are also prepared well to move on to Year 1 at the end of their time in early years.

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	117384
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	448675

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

Type of school	Infant
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	4–7
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	178
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Andrew Watkin
Headteacher	Claire Gunn
Date of previous school inspection	24 June 2010
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