

St Helen's Church of England Primary School

Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead, St Albans, AL4 8AN

Inspection dates 3–4 March 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Outstanding	1
	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		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- The very large majority of pupils reach above average standards in reading and writing at 7 and 11 years of age. In mathematics, standards are rising rapidly.
- Changes in the approach to identifying and supporting low-attaining pupils, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs are proving effective. As a result, these pupils are now making rapid gains in learning.
- Good teaching from Year 1 through to Year 6 ensures that all pupils are given interesting work that stretches them but is not too difficult.
- The school's broad and balanced curriculum promotes well the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and contributes effectively to pupils' understanding and appreciation of fundamental British values.
- Pupils' behaviour is good. Pupils are keen learners and mix well with each other. Attendance is above average.
- Pupils have good awareness of different types of bullying. They say they feel safe in school. Their parents and the staff agree that the school keeps its pupils safe.
- The headteacher's mantra 'we can always do better' typifies leaders' and managers' ambition to strengthen teaching, improve provision and raise standards. Leaders identify weaknesses early and take action quickly to address them. As a result, the school is improving.
- The governing body fulfils its statutory duties effectively, with confidence and with flair.
- The school's strong values and positive ethos shine through in all aspects of its work. Its inclusive culture welcomes everyone and values their contribution.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- The quality of provision across the early years requires improvement to ensure children make good progress in their Reception year.
- Although staff teach pupils the basics of e-safety (keeping children safe online and when using electronic media) this aspect of the school's work does not have a suitably high profile in the curriculum or in day-to-day teaching and learning.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors gathered a range of evidence to judge the quality of teaching and learning over time. This included 18 observations of parts of lessons (some seen together with the headteacher) taught by class teachers, specialist teachers and teaching assistants.
- Inspectors examined pupils' written work, looked at examples of work on display and investigated the school's latest information about teaching and pupils' achievement.
- A few pupils in Key Stages 1 and 2 read to inspectors and talked to them about their books. Inspectors also observed sessions where phonics (the sounds that letters make) were being taught.
- Meetings were held with pupils, parents and carers, key leaders and five members of the governing body. A telephone conversation was held with the local authority's Integration Manager and the lead inspector met with Hertfordshire's improvement adviser who monitors the school's work.
- Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at a range of documents including information about pupils' attendance and behaviour, plans for future improvement, and self-evaluation.
- Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils and arrangements for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs were examined.
- The views of the 74 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View), were taken into account, along with three letters or emails, comments from 18 parents who attended a meeting with the inspectors.
- The responses received from 19 staff who completed Ofsted's staff questionnaire were analysed.

Inspection team

Linda Killman, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Zara Harrington

Seconded Inspector

Rosemary Keen

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- This school is larger than the average primary school. The number of pupils on roll has increased significantly since the previous inspection.
- From September 2014 the school became a two-form-entry school taking 60 pupils per year. Four new classrooms have been built to accommodate growth in pupil numbers in the future.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs has decreased significantly since September 2014 and is average.
- The proportion of pupils for whom the pupil premium (additional government funding) provides support is below average.
- Children in the early years attend full time.
- The school meets the government's floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' progress and attainment by the end of Year 6.
- A new headteacher has been appointed since the last inspection. He took up post in January 2014.
- The leadership structure changed in September 2014 moving away from one full-time deputy headteacher to two assistant headteachers, one of whom is part time.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve provision in the early years so that children make good progress by:
 - ensuring that leaders and managers develop effective skills and expertise in good early years practice
 - undertaking and recording longer observations of individual children's learning so that judgements about what children know and can do, and what they need to learn next, are accurate
 - using information about children's learning to plan activities that are engaging and sufficiently challenging for children of all abilities
 - sharing the best practice across both classes
 - ensuring that the teaching of phonics is pitched at the right level and taught in a way that captures and sustains children's interest to accelerate their progress.
- Improve the knowledge, understanding and expertise of staff, parents, governors and pupils of e-safety by:
 - providing all staff and governors with up-to-date training in the safe and appropriate use of new technologies
 - working closely with families to help them to ensure that their children use technologies safely and responsibly at home and at school
 - systematically reviewing e-safety procedures and developing a policy for e-safety linked to other relevant policies such as behaviour, anti-bullying and safeguarding
 - providing an age-related, comprehensive curriculum for e-safety.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher's pursuit of excellence is ably supported by capable and effective senior leaders. Teamwork is strong, with demonstrable capacity to bring about further improvement. All staff share their leaders' ambition to drive improvement and achieve high standards in pupils' academic work and in their social behaviour.
- The leadership of teaching is effective, with targeted coaching, support and training for individual teachers underpinning improvements. Proficient leadership in mathematics has accelerated pupils' progress and raised attainment in this key subject which, in Key Stage 2, has previously trailed behind the above average standards in English. Teachers new to the profession are supported extremely well. They say they 'couldn't be happier' with all that the school does to help them.
- The school's ethos promotes inclusion and equality of opportunity strongly. The progress made by different groups of pupils is checked carefully to ensure that none is underachieving. Radical changes to provision for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs have accelerated the progress of those receiving extra help and reduced the number in need of regular support. Leaders ensure that the most able pupils are stretched in class with, for example, access to additional master classes in mathematics, to ensure that they meet their full potential.
- The leadership team has used pupil premium funding effectively, in particular, to train staff and develop their skills in supporting eligible pupils to achieve good results. Between 2012 and 2014 the gap between the attainment of this group compared to all pupils nationally has narrowed markedly in reading, writing and mathematics combined, moving it from significantly below average, to average.
- Teaching of the new National Curriculum is well underway with work ongoing to devise ways of assessing pupils' learning without reference to the levels used previously to determine attainment. Subject leaders check for coverage in the curriculum, regularly sample the quality of pupils' work, and provide training for staff. They take due responsibility for pupils' progress, but they rarely have opportunities to see teaching and learning of their subjects at first hand across the age ranges to assure its quality. This limits their ability to make a difference in the classroom.
- The curriculum and the school's ethos promote effective spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. This ensures that pupils appreciate and understand fundamental British values and how British society works. For example, pupils have opportunities to contribute to policy making, vote on issues, make choices, appreciate the value of rules and laws, and learn about different faiths and beliefs. These activities prepare pupils well for life in modern Britain.
- Safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements and all the relevant checks are made on staff and volunteers who work with pupils without supervision. The curriculum ensures that pupils learn how to learn and play safely but e-safety does not have a suitably high profile.
- Additional funding for sport (the government's sports premium) is used effectively. Its spending has had a huge impact in expanding provision and increasing pupils' participation and achievement in a wide range of physical education and sports such as football, netball, tag rugby and cross country. The subject leader and the specialist teacher for physical education are passionate about the subject and share ambition for all pupils to enjoy different sports. Those who aspire to take part in competitive events are encouraged to do so.
- Leaders are always seeking improvement. The school has developed links with other schools in the area to share the best practice and provide staff with opportunities to develop professionally.
- The local authority provides suitably light-touch support for the school, mainly to moderate judgements about teaching and achievement. The school has used training opportunities provided by the local authority well, for example, to improve the leadership and teaching of mathematics and, more recently, to improve provision in the early years. The school has responded to the guidance positively although it is

too soon to see the impact of this help in moving the quality of the provision to good.

■ The governance of the school:

- The governing body is relentless in its drive to deliver high quality education and care for pupils to enable them to develop as successful, happy learners.
- Governors carry out their statutory duties effectively. They are proactive in driving forward policy making and future planning. They monitor teaching, pupils' achievement and financial arrangements rigorously. Nonetheless, the school's evaluation of the quality of provision in the early years is too generous. While all children in Reception are happy, some are not learning as well as they should.
- Governors support the school well. They have been closely involved in any decision to exclude pupils, ensuring this is only ever a last resort and that everything possible has been done to avoid it. They attend meetings with groups of health and education professionals from other agencies to discuss ways forward to safeguard, care for and educate pupils who find learning difficult, for whatever reason.
- The governing body holds staff accountable for pupils' achievement. For example, the pay policy has recently been revised and implemented to ensure that pay progression is closely linked to pupils' achievement.
- The governing body is forward looking and astute in making sensible decisions in planning for growth in pupil numbers. For example, it took responsibility for the planning and building of the new block and expansion of library and study resources.
- Governors seek and take account of the views of parents and carers, staff and pupils. Work is ongoing to improve communication with parents, and in particular to win the confidence of the small minority that the school is aware of, who feel leaders and managers could do more to meet their children's needs.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

are good

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is usually good. In lessons and at play pupils generally respond quickly to instructions, are well-mannered and respectful to visitors. The new, behaviour policy, introduced in September 2014 is being implemented effectively and consistently by staff. This has led to a considerable decrease in the number of incidents of misbehaviour recorded formally.
- Most pupils enjoy learning and are eager to attend extra clubs before, during and after the school day; take-up is high. The older pupils in Key Stage 2 particularly show maturity, perseverance and resilience in their learning. While the content of pupils' written work is good, the care and attention given to neat handwriting and presentation is more variable.
- The school's exclusion rate was exceedingly high in 2012 and above the national average in 2013. Inspectors gathered evidence to show that this high exclusion rate was linked to children with exceptionally complex emotional and behavioural needs. A significant reduction in exclusions has been achieved since September 2014. All exclusions are carefully documented, managed well and involve local authority officers, health and educational professionals wherever necessary. The local authority's Inclusion Manager praised the school highly for the 'extra mile' it goes to keep pupils at risk of exclusion in school wherever possible.
- The school actively encourages pupils to have a view, accept responsibility and take decisions. Pupils are reflective. They know why rules are important and understand the benefits of making good choices. They get along well together, treat adults and each other with respect and have a substantial understanding of different faiths and cultures.
- Pupils show good understanding of the different types of bullying. They say they do 'lots of work on this', that bullying is rare and adults step in quickly if it happens. The posters designed by pupils in Year 2 show awareness, appropriate for their age, of what cyber-bullying is.
- Attendance is above the national average because the very large majority of pupils enjoy school and their parents support the school's attendance policy. A very small minority take family holidays in term time. The school takes records and reports these instances appropriately. It checks registers rigorously and

reports the families of pupils whose absence becomes regular to ensure that they receive support to improve their children's attendance.

Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good. All parents who responded to the questionnaire and those that met with inspectors confirmed that their children are safe. Staff agree wholeheartedly with this view. The school takes appropriate steps to ensure that all staff and visitors to the school are suitably checked to safeguard pupils.
- Pupils play safely out in the playground and use equipment sensibly. In those subjects with an increased risk factor, such as physical education (PE), pupils show good awareness of safety issues and potential hazards.
- The school does not tolerate discrimination of any kind. This message is understood fully by pupils of all ages. Pupils get on well with each other. Minor squabbles are soon remedied with the help of an adult if needs be. The school intervenes and takes suitably strong action when pupils' learning is interrupted by the inappropriate actions of others.
- Pupils know the basics about e-safety through personal, social and health education lessons in school, what their parents and sometimes visiting speakers tell them but not in enough depth. They are not up to date in managing risk with rapidly changing technology so that they are confident in reporting inappropriate content, harmful online communication with others or online behaviour that causes harm.

The quality of teaching is good

- Good and occasionally outstanding teaching ensures that pupils make good progress and achieve well. Where there has been some inconsistency in the quality of teaching, for example across different subjects, senior leaders have been quick to step in to provide coaching and to set clear targets for improvement for staff.
- Most teachers are adept at planning work that meets the different needs and abilities of pupils whether they are taught in single-age or mixed-age classes, ensuring that pupils make good progress, regardless of their starting points. In mathematics in Year 6, for example, pupils who were struggling received one-to-one tuition while the most-able pupils worked on complex problems to deepen their mastery of the subject. In PE, pupils in Year 2 made exceedingly good progress in passing and receiving a ball because the teacher knew precisely when to increase the level of difficulty and challenge by introducing movement or changing the size of the ball.
- The marking of pupils' work is effective. It gives pupils clear guidance about how to improve their work. Pupils act on the advice to rectify mistakes and to improve its quality. Parents commented that they were impressed with the marking of homework and the regular feedback that their children receive.
- Most parents are happy with the amount of homework that teachers set and mark. Teachers provide optional homework tasks for pupils to choose from. This is useful in respecting the wishes of those parents who want their children to do more at home
- Teachers discuss the progress of all groups and individuals in depth at meetings with senior leaders to identify any pupils who are at risk of underachievement and to plan ways of moving their learning forward.
- Training for teaching assistants has helped them to develop good skills in supporting pupils individually or in small groups. This is evident in the better progress of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs. Pupils with complex emotional, behavioural or learning needs are skilfully supported with good results in helping them to make progress in their learning and to mix with others and make friends.
- Pupils' phonics skills are not as advanced as they should be at the start of Year 1, but good teaching of

reading through Key Stage 1 enables pupils to catch up quickly so that, by the age of seven, most pupils achieve above average standards.

- Teaching ensures that pupils have frequent opportunities to apply their literacy skills across the full range of subjects. Teaching in all subjects allows time for pupils to develop their confidence and competence in spoken language and listening skills.

The achievement of pupils is good

- Most children start school in Reception with typical skills for their age. The large majority are capable of reaching a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year. In 2014, the proportion of children making typical progress to reach a good level development dropped from 79.5% in 2013 to 59%. While the national average at 60% is rising, the school's trend is in decline.
- Attainment in Key Stage 1 has been successfully maintained at significantly above the national average in reading, writing and mathematics over five years. This prepares pupils well for their work in Key Stage 2.
- From their below average starting points in Year 1 evidence is clearly visible of pupils' good progress in writing and mathematics. Pupils catch up quickly in Year 1 because they make good progress in relation to their attainment on entry to the school.
- In Year 2, most pupils also make good progress. They read fluently and use punctuation well to help them to read aloud with expression. Pupils are able to break down words using phonics to help them to read unfamiliar words and to spell new words in their writing. This shows that they have caught up quickly from below average starting points in Year 1.
- Across Key Stage 2, the very large majority of pupils make good progress. Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, and those supported through pupil premium funding achieve as well as others.
- The gap between disadvantaged pupils' attainment and all pupils nationally has narrowed significantly over two years moving from below average to average. This is testament to the school's effective use of the pupil premium funding. The number of these pupils in Year 6 in 2014 was too small to be able to make an accurate comparison of their attainment with that of other pupils in the school, or pupils nationally.
- Year 6 pupils read widely and have a passion for books. They complete their individual reading record with pride. Attainment in writing is above average. Historically, achievement in mathematics has lagged behind other subjects but this year, good teaching in the subject has accelerated pupils' progress. The proportion of pupils who have the required level of mastery to sit the challenging Level 6 national tests in mathematics has trebled from 2014.
- Pupils achieve well in subjects other than English and mathematics. Standards in art and design and especially physical education are above those usually seen in primary schools.

The early years provision requires improvement

- Provision in the early years is not consistently good. It constrains the progress that children are making from their starting points on entry. As a result, children are not prepared well enough for their work in Year 1.
- Leadership of the early years is not strong enough or suitably expert to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The school purchased support from the local authority to strengthen leadership and management and staff have responded positively to suggestions. However, work on this is in the early stages of development and it is too soon to determine if the changes are effective.

- Activities planned to cover the seven areas of learning required in the early years do not always provide enough depth to stretch children and advance their learning. For example, simple cutting and sticking tasks where every child does the same thing in the creative area in one class did not provide children with opportunity to be original through investigation and experimentation. The learning opportunity was too limited.
- Not all staff in the Early Years Foundation Stage unit teach phonics systematically, or at the right level for children's differing abilities, or in an interesting way. Therefore, children (especially the boys) become bored and switch off.
- The quality of assessment requires improvement. Current procedures do not give enough information about children's progress and staff do not use the information they have sufficiently well when they plan the next steps in children's learning. Staff have just begun to undertake longer observations of children's learning to ensure that they have an accurate picture of what children already know and can do.
- Examples of good provision were observed but not across the whole of the year group. For example, outdoor provision for one class was of good quality. Children planned on paper then constructed an obstacle course for their friends to try in an organised competition that they led themselves. The teacher filmed this and later showed the class the results eliciting their ideas for developing the activity in the afternoon session.
- Most children learn how to play together and share resources. However, some boys are lacking in their skills to negotiate and resolve disagreements in an acceptable way. Staff always step in quickly to help resolve any conflict. Welfare requirements to keep children safe in the early years 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	117462
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	453277

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	293
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Peter Barnes
Headteacher	Jamie Brown
Date of previous school inspection	10 June 2010
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