

St Thomas' Catholic Primary School

99 Military Road, Canterbury, Kent CT1 1NE

Inspection dates 13–14 January 2016

Overall effectiveness **Outstanding**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Outstanding
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Outstanding
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for pupils	Outstanding
Early years provision	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- Leaders at all levels have created a happy and safe environment where all pupils excel.
- Disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs or at an early stage of learning English do much better than other children nationally.
- Pupils from wide and diverse backgrounds learn cooperatively and well.
- Teaching is frequently dynamic and inspiring. Teachers make lessons challenging and fun. Pupils are excited by what they are doing.
- The school is extremely well led. The headteacher is determined and diligent. She has high expectations for all pupils and accepts no excuses for underachievement.
- The headteacher is ably supported by a recently promoted deputy headteacher and a thorough finance and personnel manager.
- Governance is outstanding and highly effective. The impressive core group of governors checks the school's progress carefully. Governors hold leaders and teachers to account regularly.
- The pastoral care of pupils is outstanding. Each pupil is treated with respect and dignity.
- Rates of attendance are above national averages due to exemplary work by the school's parent support adviser.
- The school makes an outstanding contribution to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural education.
- The school uses its Catholic ethos as a framework for ensuring that all pupils are treated as they would like to be treated themselves.
- Pupils from non-Catholic faith backgrounds are included equally in all activities so that all pupils learn to respect each other and their differences.
- The school actively promotes British values so that pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain.
- Pupils are also well prepared for secondary school. As well as attaining strong results in national tests, they are confident, resilient and self-assured.
- The vast majority of parents are pleased with how the school looks after their children, helps them learn and keeps them safe.
- The school's safeguarding arrangements are impressive and effective.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all staff, pupils and parents understand fully the school's new system for assessment by:
 - continually reviewing its effectiveness, sharing samples and comparing performance carefully with that of other schools, and communicating any adjustments to parents in a timely manner.
- Extend the range of opportunities pupils have to practise responding creatively or imaginatively to tasks, especially in the early years.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- The headteacher has led the school on a journey to becoming outstanding since she joined just before the last inspection in 2011. She is determined and diligent, but she also distributes leadership to others skilfully. Consequently, the collective team effort has resulted in an outstanding school.
- Senior leadership is supported by the recent promotion of an able assistant headteacher to the role of deputy headteacher. The two senior leaders work closely together and benefit from extremely professional and effective support from the finance and personnel manager.
- Subject leaders also contribute effectively to the progress of the pupils through their expert management of the core curriculum. All leaders know the school well and what else it can do to sustain its high levels of performance.
- Self-evaluation is rigorous, robust and effective. Action planning is detailed and focused appropriately on key priorities. For example, leaders are keen to strengthen the school's work in mathematics and so have made this the prime area of effort in 2015/16.
- Leaders have gathered together a team of great teachers. They are rigorously managed. All have clear targets for their pupils' performance and their own work. They understand that pay awards are based on meeting their targets and these may include sharing their practice widely in school and across the EduCant consortium. (EduCant is a consortium of primary schools in the Canterbury area.) Headteachers organise this group themselves.
- The provision for disabled pupils or who have special educational needs is managed highly effectively. The special educational needs coordinator knows each pupil well and what they know, understand and can do already. She works with the headteacher to ensure that in-class support is available so that they do not fall behind in their learning. Along with other leaders, she works effectively with parents to ensure that each pupil's needs are met. The special educational needs coordinator has productive and purposeful relationships with external agencies. This leads to pupils receiving specialist support from, for example, speech and language services.
- The school's curriculum is impressive. Leaders have ensured that it supports pupils' progress against the new national curriculum age expectations. It also provides a wide range of opportunities for pupils to develop and explore their religious literacy. In addition to this, it provides outstanding support for the development of pupils' numeracy and literacy. Pupils study science regularly and have weekly sessions in art and design technology. They also learn from exploring historical or geographical material, sometimes in cross-curricular ways.
- The school makes an outstanding contribution to pupils' understanding of British values. In one classroom, a bust of Queen Victoria is displayed under the Union flag, next to a copy of Dali's *Crucifixion*, alongside a display of the artefacts used in a Jewish *Pesach*. Pupils are educated sensitively and sensibly to respect each other and each other's differences. This is fully in keeping with the school's religious foundation. Pupils also practise democracy by taking part in mini-elections to their school council. Pupils are encouraged to make suggestions to the school council by putting sticky notes on its prominent wall display in the main corridor.
- The school makes exceptional use of the pupil premium (additional funding from the government for pupils eligible for free school meals). It is primarily used to provide additional qualified teacher support in classes for such pupils. This converts into above-average performance by these pupils.
- The school also uses its physical education and sports premium funding to good effect. This has had real impact on the boys who have learned much from the funded sports clubs. They have learned, for example, the benefit of 'keeping calm', which has had a positive impact on their behaviour.
- Much of the school's physical education work is supported by a skilled graduate teaching assistant. All of the teaching assistants, as well as other ancillary staff, make a commendable contribution to the overall effectiveness of the school.

The governance of the school

- The governance of the school is outstanding. Governors know the school extremely well, and are committed to its enduring success. They have judged the school to be outstanding using a range of measures and tools. Admirably, governors were keen to have their view confirmed by inspectors. Most impressively, they view the outcome of this inspection as a further stepping point on the journey to this school becoming the very best it can be.
- Governors make effective use of Kent County Council's clerking services. As a result, all of their actions are recorded carefully. Notes of meetings show the sympathetic and professional manner in which they hold leaders to account but also celebrate the many achievements of staff and pupils.
- The school's finances are healthy due to careful financial management. Governors support the headteacher in her exercise of a robust performance management system. They ensure that staff receive pay progression only when they meet their targets.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Pupils and parents are clear that children are safe and feel safe at the school. The site is well maintained and secure. All visitors are checked meticulously on entry and records of checks on adults are robustly maintained. Above all, governors ensure that there is a happy and cohesive culture in the school so that all pupils and all groups of pupils thrive.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding

- Teaching is outstanding because teachers make sure that lessons are challenging and fun. A wide range of learning activities supports pupils' growth of knowledge, skills and understanding. Pupils are excited to be in lessons and go about their work happily.
- Adults use questioning in highly effective ways. Even when reading to pupils, teachers pause to check that tricky words are understood and do not move on until everyone is clear. Teachers frequently ask pupils to talk to each other about what they are learning so that they deepen each other's knowledge and understanding.
- Teachers know how well each pupil is doing and their individual strengths and weaknesses. They ensure that the work they plan for each subject is suitable for the learning needs of each child. Consequently, no time is wasted in lessons and pupils get on with the task quickly. This means that adults can support those who need a little extra help.
- Pupils who speak English as an additional language are supported skilfully in class so that they can access the work easily. As a result, they catch up quickly with their classmates. Even those who are new arrivals or are at an early stage of learning English are supported to get to age-expected levels rapidly.
- Disadvantaged pupils similarly receive well-focused and targeted support so that they do not fall behind. This aspect of the school's work is particularly impressive. It results in the performance of disadvantaged pupils being at least as good as that of their classmates, and better than other pupils nationally.
- The school has introduced a new system for assessing pupils' learning. This was developed with partner schools in the EduCant consortium. Leaders are able to explain carefully how it enables them to record steps of progress against the new national curriculum. Teachers are getting used to accounting for the progress of their classes using this new scale. Parents are systematically learning about the new system so that they know how well their child is doing. However, the system has only been in place since September so it is too early to judge whether it will lead to the same high outcomes as have been achieved over the last four years.
- Teachers provide regular feedback to pupils and most act on this quickly. Pupils respond well when challenged to present their work more neatly, set it out more clearly, or to write in more detail or at greater length.
- Pupils develop high-level communication skills during their time in the school. They derive much of this from the focused support for their reading, but they also have ample opportunities to develop oracy skills by talking to each other, adults in class and to the class as a whole.
- Much of the learning pupils undertake occurs in highly controlled and well-planned sessions. Opportunities for them to explore and discover through open-ended activities are less common. This limits their chances to learn creatively or extend their imagination. This is particularly the case in the early years.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

is outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- The beginning of school, playtimes and lunchtimes, and the end of the school day are supervised well so that the safe environment is maintained. Good play spaces mean that there are few accidents. Parents like the system for dropping pupils at the outside classroom door. They like the opportunity this affords to speak informally with the class teacher.
- The school has developed strong routines for moving around the building so that pupils move carefully and at no risk. They are encouraged to wear appropriate clothing for playing or learning outside.
- Pupils build a strong sense of themselves as they move up through the school. This helps them to prepare for secondary school. It also helps develop the resilience needed for coping with tests in Year 6. The Year 6 class models Key Stage 3 practice well and this supports pupils' successful transition to the next stage of their educational career.
- Most notably, pupils from a diverse range of backgrounds learn happily alongside each other. Pupils mix naturally and well. In Year 2, the 'partner hands' strategy is a shining example of integration and community cohesion. In this context, pupils from minority ethnic communities flourish.
- The school's Catholic heritage provides a framework for this exceptionally inclusive culture and ethos. Pupils are expected to treat each other as they expect to be treated themselves. As a result, pupils from all over the world learn together, many of them from faith traditions other than Christianity. The school's admissions criteria enable this to happen while preserving the explicit Catholic character of the school.
- Pupils develop appropriate attitudes through a range of assemblies, and personal, social, health and economic education lessons. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is further enhanced through hymn practice, class prayer times and extra-curricular activities. Pupils were very excited by their multicultural 'bake-off', where cakes from around the world were made and exhibited by some pupils and their parents.
- Pupils are able to express clearly how they keep themselves safe in a range of contexts including online. This comes from exceptional and sensitive teaching through lessons but also the 'e-safety crew'. This is a pupil-led group supported by the deputy headteacher.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. Pupils are polite, courteous, friendly and supremely self-assured. Most possess levels of self-confidence unusual for their age. The school council and a group of Year 3 pupils held mature conversations with inspectors where they set out exactly what the school does well and how it helps them to learn. Pupils are too busy learning to misbehave.
- Most pupils conduct themselves fully in keeping with the school's high expectations. The very occasional lapses in behaviour, usually disputes between friends, are handled appropriately by staff. Simple systems communicate the high expectations so that each pupil knows exactly how well they are behaving each day.
- The school skilfully exploits natural competitiveness to ensure that boys stay focused at all times. This leads to better than expected outcomes for boys. Great support is provided for this through extra-curricular activities such as rugby and the successful football club. However, the school's chess club is also much loved by boys and contributes well to in-class concentration and accelerating progress.
- Pupils attend well. Rates of attendance are consistently above average. This is because leaders set very high expectations and targets. The parent support adviser works closely with parents whose children attend less well. The impact of her work is seen in much higher rates of attendance for such children. Exceptional notes of her work and interactions with statutory and non-statutory agencies provide robust evidence of the effectiveness of this important role.
- There have been no exclusions, either permanently or for a fixed term, since the last inspection.
- Inspectors found very little evidence of bullying. Behaviour that might lead to bullying is 'nipped in the bud' quickly. This means it rarely develops into anything longer term.

Outcomes for pupils **are outstanding**

- Pupils make rapid and sustained learning gains in all year groups and during the whole of their time at school. They do well in all subjects. There was a small decline in the published results achieved in Year 6 in mathematics in 2015, but nonetheless outcomes remained above national averages. Leaders have added even more training to address this, even though the school's overall performance was still above national averages.
- In 2014, all pupils achieved the expected standards in all subjects by the end of Key Stage 2. Similarly, all pupils had met the expected standard in the phonics check (letters and the sounds they make) by the end of Key Stage 1. Consistently, a well-above-average proportion of pupils meet the expected national standard during Year 1. This is because pupils get an exceptional start to their schooling in Reception, where phonics is taught systematically and effectively.
- Boys generally achieve higher standards than other boys nationally. They also achieve standards in school that are higher than those of the girls. Leaders have ensured that their performance does not fall behind by providing a range of texts that interest them such as Project X, opportunities to compete in sport and successful behaviour management strategies.
- Disadvantaged pupils make exceptional progress. Their performance is consistently above the national averages in reading, writing and mathematics. They outperform their classmates frequently, even though the other pupils also achieve more highly than their counterparts nationally. Additional teaching staff work well with such pupils to assure their success.
- Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs also do extremely well. Their outcomes are at least as good as those of their classmates and usually better than those of other pupils nationally. This is due to well-managed systems for identifying their needs, finding appropriate support and checking their progress carefully.
- The most-able pupils thrive alongside their classmates and as well as their counterparts nationally.
- Pupils who speak English as an additional language are sensitively supported to achieve as well as their classmates. They are supported in class so that they do not miss lessons or other parts of the curriculum. Their classmates work closely with them so that they learn quickly how to communicate in English.
- Pupils love to read and be read to. There are lots of books for them to read in the classrooms as well as in the library. Teachers communicate openly their own passion for reading and this inspires the pupils. As a result, pupils in all year groups use a vocabulary above that expected for their age. Pupils are able to communicate at this high level in their writing as well. In Year 3, many outstanding examples of writing were seen in response to a whole-class reading of *Krindlekrax* by Philip Ridley. In Year 6, pupils were highly engaged with the narrative forms used in Roald Dahl's *Boy*.
- Pupils benefit from strong teaching in design technology and also in art. They learn how to appreciate different processes and how artists and designers work with different materials. Examples of their own work adorn the classrooms and corridors.
- Work is also strong in humanities subjects. Often, teachers skilfully weave into learning good opportunities for pupils to further extend literacy or numeracy skills. Excellent examples were seen in Year 4 on the impact of climate change and tsunamis.

Early years provision **is outstanding**

- Teaching in the early years is well organised and structured. Children learn early appropriate routines for the day. They respond quickly to direction and instruction.
- Children make strong progress through the Reception Year. This prepares them extremely well for Year 1. A large majority, including those who are disadvantaged, disabled or with early identified special needs, achieve a good level of development. Many of these children have had no formal prior learning experience in a nursery.
- Some children in the early years are at an early stage of learning English. Some are new arrivals in the country. They are supported well in class and quickly catch up with their classmates.
- Adults prepare a wide range of activities that help children to learn through play. This complements the more formal systematic teaching of phonics. The phonics sessions are arranged so that children learn with others of similar ability. This helps many make rapid progress so that they can already put together three-letter words, for example.

- The large early years classroom is supported by an easily accessible outdoor learning space. Typically, in the afternoons, children are able to select the activities they wish to engage in. The learning environment has scope for even more activities which would enable children to explore the world creatively and use their imagination to its fullest extent.
- The early years team carefully plans high-quality learning activities such as a session on outer space that was witnessed by inspectors. Two children were observed using magnetic building blocks and were able to identify 'square', 'rectangle' and 'triangle' shapes, which they were forming into model rockets. They enjoyed this and were happy in their work.
- All children cooperate well with each other and the adults in early years. They behave extremely well because they understand what is expected of them. They take turns and share objects sensibly. Staff use simple commands and instructions to ensure that they stay on task all the time.
- Staff also supervise the large area carefully. They ensure that children are suitably dressed for the weather and that they line up carefully before going outside. Children move to play- and lunchtime in good order.
- Parents share in the process of assessing children on entry to the early years. They provide helpful information to the team. This productive partnership continues as the children move through the school but it is particularly important for ensuring that children make a flying start. A new system is in place this year, across the EduCant consortium, for making a baseline assessment of children's prior levels of attainment. About two thirds of the children in the current Reception Year were at or above expected levels for their age when they joined the school. This is a stronger baseline than in previous years.
- All staff contribute to gathering, through observation and skilful recording, information about the small steps of progress each child makes on a daily basis. Evidence of this progress is recorded in useful learning journals.

School details

Unique reference number	118777
Local authority	Kent County Council
Inspection number	10003824

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	206
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Marion Nash
Headteacher	Lisa D'Agostini
Telephone number	01227 462539
Website	www.st-thomas-canterbury.kent.sch.uk
Email address	headteacher@st-thomas-canterbury.kent.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	27–28 June 2011

Information about this school

- St Thomas' Catholic Primary School is smaller than the average-sized primary school and is located in the centre of Canterbury.
- There are slightly more boys than girls in the school.
- The number of disadvantaged pupils eligible for free school meals is above the national average. The school has received commendations for its work with these pupils from the Department for Education and Kent County Council.
- The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic communities is well above average.
- The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is also well above average.
- A small proportion of the school receives some form of special educational needs support directly from the school.
- The school has an average proportion of pupils with a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.
- An above-average proportion of pupils join the school or leave within a key stage.
- An above-average proportion of pupils are from areas of higher deprivation.
- The school is part of the EduCant collaboration. The headteacher is vice-chair of the Standards and Achievement Committee of the Kent Catholic Schools Partnership. She has been asked to support another Catholic school in the diocese and one elsewhere in the country.
- The local authority provides support to the school through a school improvement adviser.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection began as a short inspection of a good school under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. On day one, the lead inspector found compelling evidence that the school could be judged outstanding under section 5 of the same Act. The inspection was therefore converted to a full section 5 inspection and two further members joined the team for a second day of inspection activities.
- Inspectors observed learning at least twice in all classes. On day one, the lead inspector conducted two tours of lessons, one with the headteacher and one with the deputy headteacher.
- Inspectors met with senior leaders regularly. They also met with the Key Stage 1 and early years leader, the subject leaders for English, mathematics and science, the special educational needs coordinator, and the school's finance and personnel manager. Inspectors took into account 13 responses to Ofsted's new confidential online staff survey.
- Inspectors met with a number of parents informally and took account of 32 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's confidential online survey. They also considered a phone call received by Ofsted's call centre at the time of the inspection.
- Inspectors met with two groups of pupils and listened to two other groups of pupils read. Inspectors took account of 20 responses to Ofsted's new online pupil survey.
- The lead inspector met with a core group of governors and the school's local authority improvement adviser.

Inspection team

Dr Simon Hughes, lead inspector

Dr Rosemary Addison

Deborah Gordon

Her Majesty's Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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