

St Mark's Church of England Primary School

Eccles Row, Eccles, Aylesford, Kent, ME20 7HS

Inspection dates	30 September – 1 October 2015
Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Early years provision	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The headteacher and governors have successfully steered the school through an unsettled phase. They have rectified weaknesses in teaching and reversed a dip in pupils' achievement in 2014.
- Pupils made faster progress during Key Stage 2 in the last academic year. As a result, their attainment at the end of Year 6 improved substantially in 2015 in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Pupils' attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 has steadily improved since the previous inspection and is above national averages in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Higher achievement at both key stages in 2015 ensures that pupils are well prepared for the next stages of their learning.
- Improvements in teaching and greater precision in assessing pupils' needs have lifted pupils' achievement.
- Early years provision gives children a happy, secure and stimulating start to their education in school.
- Pupils are well behaved and safe. They enjoy school and attend regularly.
- The headteacher provides caring, committed and effective leadership. Governors, leaders and other members of staff share his determination to secure the best education for all pupils.
- Governors work very well with school leaders to check the quality of teaching and learning.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Pupils make slightly slower progress in writing than in reading and mathematics.
- Occasionally, teachers' expectations are not high enough and the work set for pupils is not hard enough, particularly for the most able and in writing.
- While pupils use a wide range of good-quality vocabulary, now and then teachers do not always challenge them to be even more adventurous in their choice of words.
- There are too few opportunities for pupils to complete longer pieces of writing or to write in subjects other than English.
- Not all subject leaders contribute fully to the school's improvement.
- A small number of parents do not feel fully informed about the school's work and about their children's progress.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Accelerate pupils' progress, particularly in writing, by making sure that:
 - teachers always have the highest expectations of all pupils, especially the most able, and consistently set work which makes them think hard
 - teachers challenge pupils to use a more extensive range of vocabulary in their writing
 - pupils have more opportunities to write at length and in a wider range of subjects.
- Make sure subject leaders have a stronger role in the school's improvement by ensuring that they have more opportunities to check the quality of teaching and learning in their subject.
- Strengthen systems to inform parents about the school's work and about their children's progress.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- St Mark's is a friendly and inclusive school. It offers a warm welcome to pupils of differing abilities, beliefs and backgrounds. Strong relationships throughout the school underpin its work. One pupil commented, 'We're one big family'.
- A marked decline in pupils' achievement in 2014 acted as a wake-up call for senior leaders, governors and the local authority. They recognised that teaching in the past had not built well enough on pupils' prior learning, particularly in Key Stage 2. Since then, leaders have secured significant improvements in the quality of teaching, accelerating pupils' progress and lifting achievement in 2015.
- The school is enjoying a more settled phase now, with a well-established team of staff. Leaders and teachers have worked with local schools to ensure that assessments of pupils' learning are accurate and robust. Not only has this improved the reliability of assessments, but it has also helped teachers to be more self-assured when evaluating pupils' needs.
- Teachers make good use of well-focused training and support to develop their practice. No weak teaching remains.
- Staff morale has improved over the past year. Teachers are positive and motivated because they can see the impact of improvements on rising achievement.
- Leaders have increased checks on the quality of teaching. This means they can respond more quickly to teachers' training needs and teachers are more accountable for pupils' achievement.
- The local authority increased levels of support for the school following the dip in standards in 2014. Over the past year local authority representatives have worked very well with the headteacher and governors to strengthen senior leadership and to secure improvements in teaching and learning.
- The school's religious values, such as fellowship, trust and peace, regularly feature in worship times and contribute well to the school's inclusive ethos. Pupils learn about a range of world religions, including Judaism, Hinduism and Christianity. They talk about different beliefs and faiths with interest and respect. Worship times reflect the positive community ethos, with the youngest children often giving older siblings a little wave of greeting as they enter the hall.
- Leaders and teachers run a wide range of clubs, which are popular with the pupils. For example, during the inspection pupils at the 'board games club' were engrossed in playing games such as 'Who's Who', 'Connect Four' and 'Twister'. These activities very successfully promoted social and language skills, while also giving pupils an opportunity to catch up with their friends.
- Pupil premium funding is used well to target individual pupils' needs. For example, some pupils have extra help with their reading while others benefit from social groups. Pupils are more confident in class as a result and behaviour has improved.
- Pupils develop a good understanding and appreciation of British values through a range of well-planned activities. For example, pupils learn about Britain's role in the United Nations since the Second World War and discuss traditional customs and celebrations such as harvest suppers. They also regularly discuss questions relevant to their own experience, such as, 'What do I hope to achieve next year and in the future?' and so develop a sense of personal responsibility and ambition.
- The sport premium is used well to support pupils' progress in physical education. Leaders give sport a high priority. Teachers have improved their teaching following specialist sports training. New assessment systems ensure that they track pupils' progress in physical education more closely. Increased opportunities for pupils to compete in events with other schools, including hockey, tag rugby, cross country and cycling, contribute well to pupils' enjoyment of school and to their well-being.
- Leaders and staff have reviewed and updated the way subjects are taught, ensuring that pupils learn a broad range of knowledge and skills as they move up through the year groups. Teachers plan together so that they can share expertise and check for consistency in learning between classes and year groups. Events and themed days help to bring learning to life.
- The teaching of art is a particular strength in the school. Pupils speak enthusiastically about recent art projects and competitions. Good-quality art work is evident in the displays throughout the school, enhancing pupils' experience of learning.
- Subject leaders have recently begun to play a more active role in the school's development by, for example, delivering training to their colleagues and completing action plans. However, their roles in checking the quality of teaching and learning in lessons are not yet fully developed.

- Most parents who responded to the online questionnaire are confident in the school's leadership and would recommend the school. However, a small minority expressed concerns about the quality of information they receive about the school's work and about their children's progress. Leaders have increased the information provided for parents over the past year, including news about curriculum changes. However, they recognise that communication could be even better.
- **The governance of the school**
 - A dip in the school's performance in 2014 prompted much debate within the governing body and led to radical changes in the way it operates. They recognised that, in the past, they had not visited the school frequently enough and that their checks on teaching were not sufficiently robust. The governing body and headteacher commissioned a local authority review of its work last year. This increased governors' understanding of how they could provide more challenge for school leaders. This is now a well-developed aspect of their work with the school. For example, they regularly ask leaders searching questions about teaching and learning. They look for evidence in school to supplement what they are told by senior leaders, including speaking with pupils, visiting lessons and looking at pupils' work.
 - Governors are much more confident about their roles and responsibilities. For example, they have made changes to the timings of governors' meetings so that they fit better with the financial year and with the publication of national school performance information. This ensures that discussions and decisions are more relevant and actions taken have a more immediate effect.
 - Governors bring a wide range of skills and experience to the school which complement the school's work well. They are very clear about the school's strengths and about priorities for improvement in teaching and learning. Governors were fully informed about an element of weaker teaching in the past and about what senior leaders do to improve teaching and learning.
 - Governors are justifiably proud of improved achievement in 2015 but are not complacent. They successfully combine support for the headteacher and his staff with robust challenge.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Office personnel ensure that all necessary recruitment checks are complete and up to date. The school grounds are well maintained and secure. Leaders provide parents with regular advice to help them to keep their children safe, including tips about how to use the internet safely and links to helpful organisations on the school website.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Teachers work well together to plan interesting and enjoyable lessons which effectively reinforce and build on pupils' previous learning. Teachers are keen to develop their practice further and willingly try out new ideas.
- Teachers in Reception Year and Key Stage 1 ensure that pupils learn important early reading skills quickly and securely. They teach phonics skills (the sounds letters make) effectively so that pupils make good progress in reading. Confident teaching of reading across the school builds well on this good start.
- Teachers make sure pupils read often and widely, so that pupils are able to practise and improve their skills quickly. The library provides a welcoming place for pupils to regularly choose and read books.
- The teaching of mathematics has improved since the previous inspection. Teachers make better use of practical resources, such as cubes, number lines and place value cards, to develop pupils' mathematical skills and understanding. As a result, pupils tackle mathematical problems more confidently and successfully.
- Teaching assistants work well alongside the teachers to support pupils' learning, including disabled pupils and those with special educational needs. They regularly discuss pupils' needs with teachers so that they are clear about how they can help pupils to do their best. For example, during the inspection a teaching assistant provided focused support for pupils in Years 1 and 2 to improve addition and subtraction skills, while a teaching assistant in Reception Year helped individual pupils to practise and use phonics successfully.
- Teachers mark pupils' work regularly in line with the school's marking policy. More precise advice and feedback to pupils about how to improve their work over the past year has accelerated pupils' progress.
- Most teachers have high expectations of pupils' abilities and set work which is challenging and thought-provoking. However, sometimes they set work which is too easy for some pupils, particularly the most able. This slows pupils' progress at times, especially in writing.
- Teachers give pupils regular and frequent opportunities to complete shorter writing tasks during English

lessons so that pupils are able to practise and hone writing skills. However, there are fewer opportunities for pupils to complete longer pieces of writing or to write in a broader range of other subjects.

- Teachers effectively show pupils how to check and improve their written work so that they can be more responsible for their own learning. For example, they encourage pupils to use dictionaries and word banks to improve their writing. However, at times teachers miss opportunities to encourage the most-able pupils to use a wider range of vocabulary in their writing.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. Pupils feel safe and valued because adults actively listen to what they have to say and respect their views.
- Good relationships between pupils in different year groups are a notable feature of this small village school. One pupil said that, while friends occasionally fall out, any disagreements are short lived.
- Pupils take care of each other and are concerned if anyone is upset. For example, during the inspection an older pupil checked that one of the youngest pupils in the school was happy when she spotted her sitting on her own at playtime.
- Pupils confidently describe what they do if they have a concern. They say that sometimes their friends help them to explain their worries to an adult and that teachers and midday supervisors are always quick to sort out any problems.
- Pupils say that they are treated well by adults and by their classmates. Records indicate that incidents of bullying are rare and are dealt with effectively. One pupil said, 'We don't really have bullying in school.'
- Regular activities to develop pupils' well-being, such as involving all pupils in creating class charters for behaviour and learning, help them to grow in confidence and develop a sense of personal responsibility. For example, pupils in one class signed up to statements such as 'We have a right to be respected' and 'We have a right to be included.'
- Pupils have a sensible view about how they can help to stay safe. For example, when using the internet, they know they must report anything which appears on the computer screen which makes them feel uncomfortable to their teacher immediately.
- All parents who completed the online questionnaire feel their children are happy and safe in school.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Most pupils like school, work hard and attend regularly. They talk proudly about their work and about their school.
- Most pupils behave well in lessons because they are interested in learning and want to do their best. However, a few lose concentration from time to time. When this is the case, they become fidgety and distracted and make slower progress. Most parents consider pupils to be well behaved.
- Pupils of different ages chat happily in the dining hall while they eat their lunch. They are respectful towards adults and follow the rules. They sensibly clear away their plates when they have finished their lunch.
- Attendance is consistently in line with the national average. The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from school has steadily decreased over the past three years and is well below the national average.

Outcomes for pupils are good

- Pupils' progress accelerated last year, particularly during Key Stage 2, following a marked dip in pupils' standards at the end of Year 6 in 2014. As a result, pupils' attainment increased substantially in 2015 at the end of the key stage in reading, writing and mathematics. While the school did not meet floor standards for pupils' achievement in 2014, rapid improvements in teaching and learning put it back on track in 2015.
- Pupils say that they learn new things in lessons and are making good progress. School assessments and the work in their books confirm this view. However, while pupils make rapid progress in reading and mathematics, they make slightly slower progress in writing.

- Pupils of all ages are keen to read. They talk enthusiastically about books and their favourite authors. They like using the library and treat books with care.
- Pupils develop a secure knowledge of number and use this with increasing confidence as they move up through the year groups. Pupils say that mathematics tasks are much harder than before, reflecting teachers' increased expectations and better assessment of pupils' needs.
- Steady improvements in achievement at the end of Key Stage 1 over the past three years mean that pupils start Year 3 each year with increasingly high knowledge and skills levels. The results of the Year 1 phonics check are consistently above the national average.
- Higher expectations and improved teaching mean that the most-able pupils usually make better progress than before. However, there are still a few times when teachers' expectations of these pupils are not as high as they could be and the work set is too easy, particularly in writing. When this is the case, pupils' progress slows a little. The proportion of pupils attaining the higher level (Level 5) at the end of Year 6 increased in reading and mathematics in 2015. However, this success was not duplicated in writing, where the proportion decreased. Similarly, while the proportion of pupils attaining Level 3 in reading at the end of Year 2 was above average in the same year, the proportion was below average in writing and mathematics.
- Pupils take care with their written work, learning how to check and edit their own writing well. However, not all pupils challenge themselves to think of different words to express their ideas, relying instead on tried and trusted vocabulary. This is particularly the case for the most-able pupils, whose writing, while effective, could be even more powerful. While pupils regularly write for different purposes and audiences, they have fewer opportunities to develop ideas in longer pieces of written work or to practise their writing skills in other subjects across the curriculum.
- Disadvantaged pupils' progress compares favourably with that of their classmates and with other pupils nationally. This group's achievement is not reported in detail as there were very few eligible pupils in Year 6 in 2014.
- Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs make similar progress to their peers. They play an active and valued part in all aspects of school life.

Early years provision

is good

- The early years leader uses her considerable knowledge and experience of teaching the youngest children in the school very well. Warm and caring relationships ensure that children are settled and relaxed. Children behave very well. They listen carefully to adults and get on well with each other.
- Adults accurately assess children's needs when they join Reception. This ensures that they quickly identify individual children's needs and put in extra help where needed. The teacher regularly checks that children are making good progress.
- The outdoor area is an attractive and inviting place for children to play and learn. Children have fun and learn well, confidently choosing from a wide range of stimulating activities. Children quickly grow in self-esteem as a result.
- Adults use questioning well to check children's understanding and to move their learning forward. For example, during the inspection an adult worked with a child to help her count and order numbers up to 20 using glass pebbles on a number line.
- Adults make sure that there are many opportunities for children to develop language skills and a love of reading. For example, during the inspection children enjoyed performing a puppet show to a watching adult, happily shouting 'Stop! Thief!' when Mr McGregor spotted Peter Rabbit in his garden.
- Children make rapid progress in all aspects of learning. By the end of Reception Year, children are well prepared with the knowledge and skills they need for the next stage of their learning in Year 1. The proportion of children achieving expected levels by the end of Reception Year are broadly in line with the national average and increased in 2015.
- Adults plan engaging activities which appeal to children's natural curiosity. For example, during the inspection children enjoyed using magnifying glasses to look for autumn leaves in the supervised woodland area.

- Children concentrate and persevere to complete tasks which they find difficult. For example, during the inspection a group of children worked hard to cut out paper leaves, using cotton buds and cotton reels to add paint and patterns.
- Leaders give safeguarding arrangements a high priority. Classroom and outdoor areas are well maintained and secure so that children are safe. Adults are quick to respond to children's needs, while allowing them the scope to make individual choices about their learning. They show children how to use equipment carefully. This helps children to develop an early awareness of how they can help to look after their school.

School details

Unique reference number	118618
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10002351

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	121
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Martin Wood
Headteacher	Jonathan Bassett
Telephone number	01622 717337
Website	www.st-marks-aylesford.kent.sch.uk/
Email address	headteacher@st-marks-aylesford.kent.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	11–12 September 2013

Information about this school

- The school is smaller than the average-sized primary school.
- The proportion of pupils supported by the pupil premium is below that found in most schools. The pupil premium is additional government funding to support those pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and those in the care of the local authority.
- Most pupils are White British.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs supported is average.
- The school did not meet the government's current floor standards in 2014, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- The school has five mixed age classes. The Reception and Year 1 pupils are in one class; Years 1 and 2 are taught in the second class; Years 3 and 4 in the third class; Years 4 and 5 in the fourth class and Years 5 and 6 in the fifth class.
- The school provides full-time early years provision in a mixed class of Reception children and Year 1 pupils.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed pupils' learning in seven lessons or part lessons with the head of school.
- Discussions were held with the headteacher, senior leaders, teachers, members of staff, a representative of the local authority, parents and pupils. A meeting was also held with a group of governors.
- The inspector took account of 47 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View. In addition, she considered the views expressed by parents who spoke with her informally at the end of the school day.
- The inspector observed the school's work and considered a range of documents and policies, including the school's improvement plan, information about pupils' progress, attendance records and safeguarding policies and procedures.
- The inspector looked at a sample of pupils' work provided by the school, as well as looking at pupils' work in lessons. She listened to pupils in Year 2 and Year 6 reading.

Inspection team

Julie Sackett, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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