

St Mary's Church of England Academy

Rook Tree Lane, Stotfold, Hitchin, Hertfordshire SG5 4DL

Inspection dates	5–6 May 2016
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

- This school has improved quickly because leaders and teachers have worked together successfully and improved the quality of teaching and pupils' progress.
- Teaching and learning are good across the school. Teachers have high expectations for learning and behaviour and provide pupils of different ages and abilities with challenging and interesting work.
- Leaders and teachers make regular checks on pupils' progress, which helps them adapt teaching to ensure that all pupils can make good progress.
- Pupils in all year groups make good progress from their different starting points in most subjects, including reading and mathematics. Following significant improvement, pupils' writing skills are good.
- Where improvement was required at the last inspection, effective teaching has helped groups of pupils to catch up, particularly boys, disadvantaged pupils and the most able.
- Pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare are good because of the work of the school in keeping them safe, promoting good attitudes and encouraging healthy living.
- Leaders and governors evaluate the school's performance accurately and this has helped drive improvements in the quality of education, especially teaching and learning.
- The quality of education in the early years is good. Children make good progress because of high expectations, accurate assessment and good teaching.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- In geography and religious education, pupils are not provided with sufficient time to complete written work to the standards they achieve in other subjects.
- Teachers in key stage 1 sometimes do not fully enough check on pupils' understanding when starting new work in mathematics. As a result, a small number of pupils do not make best use of their mathematical knowledge, and their progress, correspondingly, is slower than others.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the teaching of mathematics by making sure that teachers in key stage 1 routinely explain tasks thoroughly to pupils and pay close attention to those pupils who need the most help to make a confident start to their work.
- Fully develop pupils' written skills in religious education and geography so that they are as good as in other subjects by making sure that pupils are provided with enough time to prepare more detailed and structured written pieces of work.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- This school is well led. The headteacher provides highly effective leadership and has firmly raised expectations about the school's performance. She is well supported by her senior team, governors and teachers, so that the school continues to improve. Teachers' morale is high. They are extremely hard working and accept the challenge of raising the quality of teaching and improving pupils' progress. Parents are confident about the school's performance and the significant improvements that have taken place. This is reflected in the online questionnaire for parents, Parent View, and staff questionnaire returns.
- Leaders make regular checks on all aspects of the school's performance, with particular attention to the quality of teaching, learning and pupils' behaviour and well-being. They have a very accurate view of the school's strengths and make very good use of their self-evaluation work to set clear priorities for improvement.
- Senior leaders drive improvements in teaching and learning through highly effective support and training for staff, and tackle any remaining weaknesses in teaching. This has brought about the good-quality teaching that is found across the school.
- The headteacher, working with governors, has strengthened the school's approaches for managing and improving the performance of staff, through careful checks on the impact of teaching on pupils' learning and precise links to the quality of teaching. Teachers are supportive of these arrangements and pay is awarded on the basis of improved performance.
- Subject leaders are highly effective and influential in their work to improve the teaching of reading, writing, mathematics and other subjects. They use their high levels of subject knowledge and pupils' assessment information to determine improvements to teaching. They also meet with teachers regularly in order to discuss pupils' progress and agree on how to ensure all are learning well.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced, and relevant to the needs of all pupils. Leaders have focused on developing pupils' communication, language, literacy and numeracy skills, and teachers ensure that learning activities are interesting as well as challenging. There have been much-needed improvements made to the way in which writing is taught across most of the different subjects of the curriculum. This has raised achievement, especially for boys, whose writing skills needed improvement the most.
- History is a strength of the curriculum and pupils enjoy making films that help promote their school on topics that include the work of the school council. A wide range of visits enriches learning, such as trips to different places of worship, including churches, a Sikh temple and a mosque. Pupils are also able to enjoy a wide range of clubs at lunchtime and after school, including sports.
- The school promotes British values very well. Pupils learn about the importance of democracy. They take part in elections to the school council and take leadership roles in school clubs, where they become experienced in working with others to make decisions as representatives of other people. This work also helps them appreciate the rule of law. Pupils respect difference and tolerate views and beliefs that are different from their own. Displays are dedicated to British values, and assemblies actively promote them.
- Leaders' use of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils is highly effective. They are provided with high-quality additional support, and a senior teacher carefully checks on their progress in order to ensure they do not fall behind their classmates. As a result, gaps between their progress and that of other pupils have closed significantly.
- Leaders make good use of additional funding to promote sporting activities. Professional coaches offer effective tuition to pupils and good training for school staff, which has increased pupils' interest in active sports. As a result, large numbers of pupils now take part regularly in gymnastics, cricket, tennis and football in school clubs, while others compete in teams at district level.
- Leaders have used highly effective external support to help them focus on the school's improvement and develop their leadership skills. A diocesan school improvement partner has provided very useful advice about self-evaluation, and a local headteacher has provided examples of high-quality leadership practice. As a result of this valuable help, leaders and governors have been able to secure their own capacity to continue improving the school into the future.

■ The governance of the school

- Governors are highly committed and have worked closely with leaders to help drive the school's improvement work. Governors have evaluated their skills and areas of expertise and have ensured that they are suitably trained for their role in supporting and challenging leaders over the school's performance. They have a very accurate view of the school's strengths and any areas that require attention because they visit regularly and challenge leaders to provide details of improvements in areas such as teaching and behaviour. They are now skilled in the use of assessment information and this allows them to ask challenging questions about pupils' progress and the way in which leaders use additional funding to help disadvantaged pupils.
 - Governors are well informed about arrangements for the performance management of all staff, including the headteacher. They demonstrate a clear understanding of the link between staff performance and pay awards and this delivers value for money.
 - Governors offer a clear understanding of their duties regarding the safeguarding of pupils. They are suitably trained and their regular questioning of leaders contributes to a culture of vigilance at the school.
- Arrangements for the safeguarding of pupils are effective. This is because leaders make all required checks to ensure that staff and visitors are suitable to work with children. They have also ensured the school is a safe environment and that policies and procedures are followed effectively. Most importantly, because of effective training, different members of staff and governors know what to do and how to act in the event of a concern, including those relating to the Prevent duty (government advice to schools to have due regard to the need to identify signs of extremism and radicalisation). All of these factors reduce risk and make children safe.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Teaching and learning are good across the school.
- Teaching is well organised. Teachers ensure when planning together within the same key stage that they plan their lessons carefully so that work and activities are well matched to the differing abilities of all pupils, and suitably difficult.
- Teachers have high expectations for learning and behaviour. Relationships between pupils and teachers are very positive and pupils are inspired to try hard and meet the demands placed on them. Pupils respect their teachers and enjoy learning.
- Teachers use information about pupils' prior learning effectively. They plan activities that build on pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding and this ensures that pupils are able to make secure progress.
- Teachers make effective use of questioning. Questions are well planned and help pupils to use their knowledge, think deeply and offer well-supported answers. Teachers use these sessions to help prepare pupils' thinking and get them ready to tackle new and more difficult work. As a result, pupils feel confident about their learning.
- Teachers plan interesting activities and make good use of resources to support pupils' learning. This has been particularly helpful for the improvement of pupils' writing skills in both key stages. In a key stage 2 writing lesson, for example, pupils were very enthusiastic when they were asked to use a vivid set of monster images to identify powerful adjectives, and developed well-considered phrases to describe a mythical creature they were writing about.
- In a key stage 1 history lesson about famous explorers, pupils wrote their own 'castaway letters to the king of Spain' when presented with 'a mysterious message in a bottle from the time of Christopher Columbus' shipwreck'. The letters demonstrated that they were encouraged in looking for suitable words around the themes of mystery and loneliness.
- Teachers use time well and this supports pupils' learning. In most writing activities, pupils are given enough time to prepare detailed and well-structured work. They eagerly study dictionaries and thesauruses to improve the range of their vocabulary and the accuracy of their spelling. However, in geography and religious education, written work is sometimes completed too quickly and does not reflect the highest standards achieved in other subjects, such as science and history, or when practising extended writing.
- Reading is taught well and pupils develop their reading skills effectively. Most read at home every day and all pupils have the opportunity to read to an adult within school if support is required. Pupils are able to choose suitable books from an attractive reading scheme.

- The teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters represent) has improved in Year 1 and pupils are confident and fluent readers as a result. Across the school, pupils of all abilities are able to explain the meaning of the stories and texts they read and they can also offer reasoned opinions about the characters. Effective support is provided to help pupils who have experienced difficulty to catch up on their reading.
- Mathematics teaching is a strength across the school. Activities are planned to help pupils secure their knowledge of numbers and multiplication tables, and then to apply their knowledge skilfully to calculation work and problems involving real-life situations such as shopping. Pupils are given many opportunities to solve problems, which is helping them to develop their fluency and confidence in mathematics and other subjects. For example, in geography and sciences, pupils record the results from research onto charts and are able to interpret what they mean.
- Pupils' work is marked according to the school's assessment policy and teachers' written comments are effective. Pupils act on the advice they receive, understanding how to improve their work and make further progress.
- Teaching assistants are used effectively to support pupils' learning. They are involved in the planning of work for the pupils they support and they pay close attention to their progress in lessons. They encourage pupils and ask useful questions which help them to focus on their learning and succeed in their work.
- Homework is set regularly and is well matched to what pupils are learning about in lessons. It is manageable and the school provides useful website resources to support parents, including guidance on reading. Parents approve of the homework set.
- Teachers promote equality of opportunity by ensuring that all pupils have the same access to learning, and by paying close attention to the additional needs of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability. There are rare occasions in key stage 1 when teachers do not check on the understanding of small numbers of less confident pupils in mathematics. As a result, they can sometimes fall behind their classmates for a while before being helped to catch up. This delays their learning potential.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils benefit from good levels of pastoral care offered by their teachers and the school's leaders. This helps them settle into the school quickly, enjoy attending, and develop their positive attitudes towards education. As a result they are well prepared for when they move up to local middle schools at the end of Year 4.
- Pupils, together with the vast majority of parents and staff, all agree that the school provides a caring and safe environment. Teachers promote good relationships and teach pupils the meaning and impact of bullying in all its forms. As a result, bullying is rare and quickly dealt with when it occurs. Pupils are taught to take responsibility for their actions and take account of the impact their behaviour has on others.
- Pupils feel safe, and the vast majority of parents agree. Teachers ensure pupils' safety by helping them understand how to reduce risks when working together, at play and when active in sports. Pupils' awareness of risk and how to be sensible when using age-appropriate internet services and computers are strengths.
- Staff encourage pupils to be kind, caring and honest, show respect towards others and work hard. This promotes their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and contributes to their good attitudes towards learning and progress. Pupils are aware of how their country has changed owing to immigration and they show respect for different people. They are sympathetic to the experiences of war refugees and less fortunate people in developing countries. Many pupils profess a Christian faith but also show a notable respect for people who follow Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and other faiths or no faith at all. They are taught well about different beliefs and visit the religious buildings of different faiths.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- The school has introduced a new behaviour policy which has been well received by all members of its community. Leaders, teachers, governors and parents are committed to the policy, and pupils agree it is fair and easy to understand. Pupils were involved in the creation of the school's 'five golden rules' for conduct and relationships, and they are respectful to one another.
- Exclusions are rare and there have been no recorded racist incidents in recent years. Instances of prejudice-based behaviour and disruption to lessons are similarly low. Pupils' conduct during the inspection was good at all times within lessons, in assemblies, at break, and during lunchtimes when using the dining room.
- Pupils' attitudes to learning are very positive. They respect learning and coming to school and they are eager to try hard in lessons. They respect their teachers and one another. They are proud of their achievements and are particularly pleased with their improved writing abilities.
- Pupils' attendance is above average and has remained so in recent years. Few are persistently absent, and the school works hard to support parents to ensure good attendance and punctuality.
- A very small number of parents expressed concern about past behaviour during the inspection. Inspectors considered their views and inspection evidence and concluded that pupils' behaviour is securely good.

Outcomes for pupils

are good

- Across the school and from their different starting points, pupils are making good progress in a wide range of subjects. They are learning well because they are acquiring secure subject knowledge and successfully developing their skills and understanding. They are making good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Gaps in progress between different groups have been firmly narrowed and pupils who underachieved in the past have seen a significant improvement in their progress since 2014, particularly in Year 4 and Year 3.
- Leaders use accurate assessment information to set targets for pupils, designed to stretch pupils to achieve above the expected age-related point by the end of each year and key stage. Leaders and teachers check on progress regularly and intervene appropriately to prevent pupils falling behind.
- Children make good progress in the early years. Most join with skills and knowledge above those typical for their age in the different areas of learning, although nearer to those typically found in reading, writing, numbers and shapes. Effective teaching helps pupils to make good progress so that the large majority are reaching a good level of development or better and are well prepared for key stage 1. Their achievement has risen in the years since the last inspection.
- In recent years, including 2015, the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in the phonics reading check declined from above average to average. However, visits to phonics lessons, listening to pupils read and the school's assessment information all show that Year 1 phonics standards are rising quickly. Pupils have been taught effectively and use their knowledge of phonics to keep trying and succeed in sounding and understanding new and difficult words.
- Progress has improved across key stage 1. In 2015, results improved in all three subjects so that they were broadly higher than average in writing and mathematics and improving in reading. Current pupils' work and school assessment information show that pupils in Year 1 and Year 2 are making good progress. It is very likely that a significant proportion of boys will match or exceed expectations for their age in writing, mathematics and reading, confirming that their progress is much improved and in line with that of girls, who are learning well.
- Progress in key stage 2 is good and represents significant improvement. The current Year 4 pupils underachieved in their national tests in 2014. Current assessment records, pupils' work and discussions with pupils about their learning all confirm that they have managed to recover from their slower progress in key stage 1. Year 3 pupils are also making good progress.
- The most-able pupils are making good progress across the school and this is a significant improvement. Taking account of their higher starting points in the early years, the proportions achieving higher than expected levels of knowledge and skills in reading, writing and mathematics demonstrate that they are learning well.

- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils attending the school is below average and numbers are small in each year group. Taking account of their individual starting points, their work and their school assessment information, they are making good progress and there are no significant gaps between their progress and that of other pupils nationally. In 2015, the results in Year 2 showed that the gap was around one term behind other pupils nationally.
- Pupils with special educational needs or disability are making good progress when their learning is compared with that of other pupils with similar starting points. This is because leaders and teachers set high expectations for them, assess them accurately, provide effective support in lessons and regularly check on their progress.
- Progress is good in most subjects, including writing, reading and mathematics. However, in subjects including geography and religious education, pupils do not make as much progress in the development of their written skills and this is preventing outstanding progress. In addition, small groups of pupils are sometimes unable to make as much progress as their classmates in key stage 1 mathematics lessons. This is because teachers sometimes do not check that they understand the work set at the beginning of activities.

Early years provision

is good

- The leadership of the early years is a strength within the school and ensures that all children are making good progress from their starting points. As a result they are well prepared for key stage 1.
- The early years leader sets very high expectations for children's development, and provides them with a good start for when they move up to school, to ensure they make the progress they are capable of by the end of Year 2. Staff share this vision and work as a highly effective team.
- Arrangements for moving up to Year 1 are effective. Assessment information and children's work are used to help make sure they continue to receive suitably challenging work when they leave the early years.
- Leaders and teachers ensure that accurate assessments take place when children join the early years. As well as formal assessments, use is made of information provided by nurseries and parents who work closely with the school to contribute to the assessment of their children. As a result, leaders and teachers have a reliable view of the level of development of the children on entry. Assessments show that children enter with skills and knowledge that are above those typical for their ages in most areas of development, but are closer to those typically expected in reading, writing and mathematics.
- The classrooms and outdoor areas support good learning. They are well organised with interesting resources for different activities and the children enjoy their experiences.
- Teaching and learning activities are very well planned and matched to children's different starting points and stages of development. Work is focused on building up skills in all areas of development, especially numeracy and literacy.
- Children are provided with stimulating work and play which encourages their curiosity and imagination. In a story-telling lesson about 'the gingerbread man', they were inspired to ask very searching questions and showed how they could reflect on the experience of other people and fictional characters. In a play session, one group of boys correctly identified different species of farm animal and accurately recorded them in writing, while other children applied their early number knowledge to work out the cost of a shopping list.
- Teachers and teaching assistants pay close attention to the learning of all children. They regularly check on their work and play activities and are very encouraging and supportive. As a result of this care and assessment, different groups of children currently in early years are making good progress, including boys and girls, who are achieving equally well, those with special educational needs or disability, and the most able.
- Children's behaviour is good and they are kept safe. They cooperate with each other and their social development is strong. Teachers continually encourage them to be kind and help each other, and their high expectations are met.

School details

Unique reference number	138022
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	10011791

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	4–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	229
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Rob Thornley and Anna Matthews (co-chairs)
Headteacher	Sam Bishop
Telephone number	01462 730343
Website	www.st.marysacademystotfold.co.uk
Email address	office@stmarysacademystotfold.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	5–6 March 2014

Information about this school

- St Mary's Church of England Academy is smaller than the average-sized primary school. Pupils attend classes set in mixed-age groups as well as classes combining pupils of different abilities.
- The school converted to become an academy in April 2012.
- The school is not part of a chain of state academy schools but it is part of the Anglican diocese of St Albans.
- Most pupils are of White British heritage and the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is well below average. Very few pupils speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of pupils with special educational need or disability is below average, and the proportion supported by a statement of special educational needs or through an education, health and care plan is very low.
- The number of pupils supported by funding known as the pupil premium is low. The pupil premium is additional funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and children who are looked after by the local authority.
- There is a children's centre on the site which is run by the governing body but inspected separately.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited 14 lessons and part-lessons, three of them with senior leaders, and an assembly.
- They examined samples of pupils' work from a range of subjects, including reading, writing, mathematics, history, art, geography, religious education and science. They also listened to some pupils read.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documentation including: the school's self-evaluation document and improvement plan; records of governors' work; safeguarding policies and procedures; visit notes from an education adviser; records of behaviour; and attendance figures.
- They held meetings with senior leaders, the school improvement partner, subject leaders and the special educational needs and early years leaders. They also met with pupils from Year 1 to Year 4 to discuss their experience at the school and their learning across different subjects.
- Inspectors met formally with a small number of parents and also met others at the entrance to the school. Inspectors took account of 74 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, and 68 parental comments. They also took account of the views of 27 staff who completed a questionnaire.

Inspection team

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Ofsted Inspector

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