

Stella Maris School

St John's Road, Heaton Mersey, Stockport, Cheshire SK4 3BR

Inspection dates

29 November–1 December 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	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The trustees and senior leaders have ensured that the school meets all of the independent school standards.
- The headteacher and trustees are passionate about ensuring that all pupils achieve their full potential whilst at Stella Maris School. Under their guidance, the school is continuing to improve.
- Senior leaders and staff have established a calm and caring ethos. Pupils are well looked after and nurtured in a safe and secure environment.
- Teaching across a wide range of subjects, in Years 1 to 6, is consistently good. Teachers capture pupils' interest well with exciting and stimulating activities. As a result, all groups of pupils make strong progress across a wide range of subjects and achieve well. However, occasionally the level of challenge is not high enough, particularly for the most able
- All groups of children get off to a flying start in their education in the early years, making strong gains in their learning.
- Pupils feel safe and are very keen to learn. Standards of behaviour in class, at breaktimes and around the school are impeccable. Pupils are very proud of their school and enjoy attending.
- Staff morale is high. Teamwork is strong and staff know individual pupils exceptionally well. However, opportunities for teachers to observe and learn from each other are limited.
- Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of all aspects of the school's work. They appreciate the 'strong pastoral care' and the 'excellent culture and ethos that exists within the school'.
- Systems for monitoring targets in the school development plan, the quality of teaching and the curriculum are not as rigorous as they could be.
- By the school's promotion of academic and social excellence, pupils leave Stella Maris School at the end of Year 6 well prepared for the next stage of their education.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching and thereby outcomes for pupils by ensuring that:
 - all activities challenge pupils in their learning, particularly the most able
 - all teachers use questioning that encourages pupils to think more deeply and extend their learning.
- Develop the leadership and management of the school further by ensuring that:
 - targets in the school development plan are precise and measurable
 - best practice is shared within the school
 - teachers are given the opportunity to observe effective practice at other schools locally
 - feedback given to teachers by senior leaders after lesson observations is more detailed so that teachers know exactly what they have to do to develop their practice
 - the role of the curriculum coordinator, in relation to the non-core subjects, is developed further.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The headteacher has established a positive culture of high expectations. Together with two newly appointed members of the senior management team, she is determined to provide the very best education for all pupils who attend Stella Maris School. Plans for improvement are in place. For example, new assessment procedures are being implemented to help provide more precision in the monitoring and tracking of pupils' progress and achievements.
- The school's analysis of its own performance is accurate. The school's priorities to drive forward improvements are set out in the school development plan. However, the targets set are not sharp or measurable. This makes it difficult for senior leaders and the trustees to closely monitor the progress that the school is making towards achieving its goals.
- Staff are a close-knit team. Many told the inspector that 'it is a pleasure to work at this school'. Through their dedication, staff show a strong commitment to contributing to the school's ongoing success, ensuring that pupils flourish and achieve well.
- The quality of teaching in English and mathematics is closely monitored through lesson observations, book scrutiny and reviews of planning. Strong emphasis is put on developing pupils' knowledge in both of these subjects in preparation for grammar school examinations.
- Subjects such as history and geography are not monitored with the same rigour as for English and mathematics. The wheels have already been put in motion to address this issue with the appointment of a curriculum coordinator to the senior leadership team. However, it is too early to assess the impact of her work.
- Teachers appreciate the feedback from lesson observations to help them improve their practice. However, at times, the feedback given lacks detail. As a result, teachers are not held fully accountable for developing their practice. The headteacher has quite rightly recognised that this is an issue that needs to be addressed.
- Staff attend training and complete online training courses to support their ongoing professional development. However, there are no structured systems in place to allow teachers to observe each other's practice or that of other teachers in local schools.
- A carefully planned, broad and balanced curriculum meets the needs of pupils well. Specialist teachers deliver subjects such as music, art and drama. The curriculum is further enriched by a wonderful range of trips to ignite pupils' imagination and curiosity. For example, recent trips have included visits to Ordsall Hall, Oldham Coliseum Theatre and Jodrell Bank Observatory. Many of these visits are linked to topics being studied in school. A wide range of exciting after-school clubs is also available for pupils to enjoy.
- British values are fully embedded in all aspects of the school's work and the beliefs of other faiths and cultures are respected. Such effective practice successfully promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

- The school's relationships with parents are strong. They are very supportive of the school and all that it does to support their children's academic, emotional and social development. They receive very detailed information relating to their children's progress and achievements. The fact that the school strives to treat each and every child as an 'individual' is something that parents greatly appreciate. The school website is a valuable resource for parents. It is bright, well laid out and easy to navigate. On the website, a wealth of information is made available to allow parents to participate actively in their children's learning.

Governance

- Trustees share the headteacher's vision for the school. Their aim is to improve and sustain high-quality educational provision.
- They have an accurate overview of the strengths of the school and priorities for development to drive standards up to an even higher level. They have a good overview of the quality of teaching within the school and the progress that pupils are making.
- Safeguarding duties are taken seriously, and through challenging performance management targets, the headteacher is held fully accountable.
- The budget is very carefully managed to ensure that school priorities are met.
- From discussions, it is evident that the trustees offer the headteacher support and challenge in equal measure. However, this level of challenge is not always evidenced in the minutes of trustees' meetings.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The school has an up-to-date safeguarding policy that has been reviewed to ensure that it meets the statutory requirements for safeguarding in line with guidance from the Secretary of State. The policy is published on the school website and is available as a hard copy from the school on request.
- The designated lead and her deputy are trained to the appropriate level. The headteacher is aware that a designated lead for safeguarding must be on the premises at all times when the school is open to deal with any safeguarding concerns.
- All staff have completed safeguarding training and receive regular updates. They have a good understanding of procedures to follow should they be concerned about a pupil's welfare. They realise that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and that anyone can make a referral to the appropriate authorities.
- Staff talk with some confidence about possible indicators of radicalisation, sexual exploitation and female genital mutilation. Further training around the 'Prevent' duty is planned for January 2017.
- The premises are secure and a record of visitors to the setting is maintained. There are clearly defined and effective procedures in place for the recruitment and selection of new staff to the school.

- Detailed risk assessments are in place for all aspects of the provision, and health and safety checks are carried out on a regular basis.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Evidence from observing lessons and looking at work in pupils' books and on display demonstrates that the quality of teaching over time is good, in line with the school's self-evaluation.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and activities are well planned to meet the needs of all groups of pupils. However, at times, activities are not pitched at the right level and pupils are not challenged enough, particularly the most able pupils.
- Teaching assistants are a valuable asset to the school. Together with teachers, they have established excellent warm and caring relationships with pupils. The number of pupils in each class is small. As a result, all staff have a detailed knowledge of pupils' emotional, social and academic needs.
- Some staff use skilful questioning to extend, deepen and assess pupils' learning. This was exemplified during a Years 1 and 2 science lesson where the teacher questioned pupils effectively. This allowed them to think deeply and engage in meaningful conversations about the solar system. This high-level questioning was also evident in an innovative Year 6 English lesson to support pupils with their creative writing. However, such highly effective practice is not consistent across the school.
- Pupils love to read. Those that were heard to read did so with fluency, expression and accuracy. Younger pupils make good use of their phonic knowledge to sound out words that are unfamiliar to them. All children were able to talk about the type of books that they liked to read and their favourite authors. Reading records show that pupils read regularly at home and at school. As one pupil typically commented, 'we read the first six pages of the book with the teacher and the rest at home'. Older pupils were keen to tell the inspector that the school has a wide range of books that appeal to their interests. Pupils make good use of the local library to deepen further their interest in reading.
- Pupils are not afraid to take risks. They are given time to reflect on their learning and explain their thought processes. This also allows teachers and teaching assistants to deal with any misconceptions in a swift and timely manner.
- Teachers mark books regularly and in line with the school's marking policy. Achievements are celebrated and constructive feedback given to drive pupils' learning forward.
- Pupils spoken to during the inspection told the inspector that they enjoyed homework and the challenges that it brings. Homework is appropriate to the age and development of the child.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.

- High priority is placed on inspiring all pupils to achieve well in life. Pupils take pride in their work and clearly value the importance of education. Professional visitors, such as doctors and dentists, come into school to talk to pupils about their roles.
- Pupils who talked to the inspector told her that they felt safe. They are aware of how to keep themselves safe when online and understand the dangers of disclosing passwords to a third party. An effective filtering system is in place to protect pupils when they access computer technology.
- Pupils were unanimous in the view that 'everyone is made to feel welcome' at their school, irrespective of their race, gender or culture.
- By taking part in public speaking competitions and as members of the debating society, pupils can share their ideas and discuss topical issues relating to democracy and the rule of law. For example, a recent debate centred on the USA presidential elections.
- Staff place great importance on ensuring pupils' emotional well-being. The excellent relationships that exist between staff and pupils ensure that pupils receive high-quality care and support.
- Pupils regularly help raise money for charitable causes to support others who are facing difficult situations.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Visitors to the school cannot fail to be impressed by the friendly, caring and responsible attitudes of pupils who attend Stella Maris School.
- In lessons, behaviour is exemplary. Pupils arrive promptly and ready to work. No time is wasted before they settle down to their given tasks. They work well in pairs, listening attentively and valuing each other's point of view. They move quickly and without fuss from one activity to the next.
- Similar standards of behaviour were observed in the school corridors, out-of-school club and school grounds. Older pupils take their responsibilities as 'buddies' to the younger children very seriously. 'Buddies' reinforce the importance of kindness, tolerance and respect to their young protégées. They also support them with aspects of their learning, such as reading.
- Pupils really do enjoy coming to school and this is reflected in their high rates of attendance. Stringent procedures are in place to follow up any unexplained absences.
- Pupils are aware of the different forms of bullying and the distress that it causes. All pupils spoken to stated quite categorically that bullying at their school is rare. Behaviour logs confirm that this is the case. If any instances of bullying did occur, pupils are confident that staff would take immediate action to sort it out.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Children enter early years with knowledge and skills that are broadly typical for their age. From their different starting points, all groups of children, including the most able, make good progress and achieve well across all areas of learning.

- Good standards of progress and achievement in a wide range of subjects, including science, geography and history, continue as pupils move through the school. Most notable are the high levels of achievement in English and mathematics as pupils leave the school at the end of Year 6.
- Case studies show that as a result of high-quality teaching and good partnership working with other agencies, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress from their different starting points.
- The school strives to ensure that the most able pupils are challenged in all aspects of their learning. For example, pupils are taught in ability groups for phonics, ensuring that the needs of those who learn more quickly are fully met. Furthermore, during the summer term in Year 6, those pupils who have been identified as being the most able go to local secondary schools for English and mathematics lessons. However, inspection evidence shows that, at times, and across year groups, activities do not always challenge pupils to achieve their very best. As a result, on occasions, the progress of this group of pupils slows.
- A number of pupils enter the school halfway through the year. School assessment information shows that this group of pupils make similarly good rates of progress as their peers do.
- There is a strong emphasis on preparing pupils for grammar school examinations. Year on year, the number of pupils passing these examinations is high.

Early years provision

Good

- The leadership and management of the early years are good. The early years leader has a detailed overview of the strengths and priorities for development for the early years unit.
- All children, including the most able and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, make good progress in their learning. Children are well prepared for their transition into Year 1.
- Children are happy, confident and settled. They are secure with the routines that operate within the classroom. They are learning to value diversity and gain an appreciation of other cultures as they say 'good morning' to each other in French, Polish, Spanish and Arabic.
- Language skills are well promoted and conversation flows freely as children play. Children giggle with delight as they talk to each other and staff about the models they have made. Others are engrossed as they weigh and measure ingredients to make gingerbread men. Staff made good use of the digital scales to help with children's number recognition.
- Adults are calm, kind and caring. Children are safe and behave very well. They show good levels of concentration as they learn and play. At the time of the inspection, no breaches of the statutory welfare requirements were evident.
- Positive relationships have been established with parents, which helps to promote security and consistency in children's lives. Parents take an active part in their children's learning and are kept well informed about their achievements.

- Workshops run by staff on topics such as reading give parents help and guidance to allow them to develop their children's learning at home.

School details

Unique reference number	106154
DfE registration number	356/6016
Inspection number	10026003

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Type of school	Other independent school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	3 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	62
Proprietor	Trustees of Stella Maris School
Chair	Dr John Swarbrick
Headteacher	N. Johnson
Annual fees (day pupils)	£7,488
Telephone number	0161 432 0532
Website	www.stellamarisschool.co.uk
Email address	office@stellamarisschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	4 March 2014

Information about this school

- Stella Maris School opened in 1979. The school was originally a convent and has close links with the Catholic Church.
- The school is located in the Heaton Mersey area of Stockport.
- The school is registered as an independent primary, day school for up to 71 boys and girls aged from three to 11 years.
- Currently there are four mixed-aged classes and one Year 1 class. There is an early years class for children aged from three to five years.
- There are 62 pupils on roll, including 12 children in the early years unit.

- The number of children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is low. There are no pupils with an educational, health and care plan.
- No disadvantaged pupils attend this school.
- The school runs a club offering care to children before and after school.
- Most pupils are of White British heritage.
- Some pupils enter the school, in different classes, halfway through the year.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed teaching and learning across all classes.
- Observations were made of pupils' behaviour at the beginning of the day, at breaktimes, in the breakfast club and in lessons.
- Meetings were held with senior leaders, staff, pupils and a trustee of the school.
- The inspector listened to pupils read and looked at work in their books and on display.
- A number of documents were scrutinised, including the school's self-evaluation of its own performance and the school development plan. Behaviour and attendance records and information relating to safeguarding were also looked at.
- The inspector took account of 13 responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire. The views of nine staff who completed the questionnaire were also considered.

Inspection team

Sheila Iwaskow, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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