

INSPECTION REPORT

ST NICHOLAS CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Sutton Coldfield

LEA area: Birmingham

Unique reference number: 103475

Headteacher: Mrs M McConnell

Reporting inspector: Mr P Edwards
21069

Dates of inspection: 19 – 21 June 2000

Inspection number: 193920

Inspection carried out under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Type of school: Infant and Junior

School category: Voluntary aided

Age range of pupils: 4 - 11

Gender of pupils: Mixed

School address: Jockey Road
Sutton Coldfield
West Midlands

Postcode: B73 5US

Telephone number: 0121 355 2649

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Appropriate authority: The Governing Body

Name of chair of governors: Mrs P Platt

Date of previous inspection: 20th May 1996

INFORMATION ABOUT THE INSPECTION TEAM

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PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

St Nicholas is a Catholic Primary school with 253 pupils on roll, 117 boys and 136 girls, which is similar in size to the average primary school. It has recently acquired Beacon School status for work in information technology, design and technology and the school ethos. The school, which is situated in Sutton Coldfield, is a popular school and frequently over-subscribed. Ninety three per cent of the pupils are from white ethnic backgrounds; pupils are mostly of European and black African heritage. No pupils are at an early stage of learning English. Three per cent of the pupils are eligible for free school meals which is low when compared with the national figures. There are no pupils with statements of special educational needs and six per cent of the pupils are on the school's register of special educational needs. This too is low when compared with the national figures. Most of the pupils have experienced some pre-school education prior to commencing full time education and their attainment on entry to St Nicholas is above average.

HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS

This is a very good school. The pupils achieve high standards in English, mathematics and science when compared to similar schools and good standards in most other aspects of their education. The quality of teaching is good and the senior management team and governing body provide very effective leadership. Expenditure per pupil is relatively high but finances are used very efficiently and the school provides very good value for money.

What the school does well

- At the ages of seven and eleven the pupils achieve high standards in the National Curriculum tests. The headteacher and staff are committed to sustaining these high standards and the pupils are well prepared for the tests.
- Overall, the quality of teaching is good with examples of very good and some excellent teaching.
- The pupils behave very well and have very positive attitudes towards their work.
- Attendance is very good, lessons start punctually and the pupils enjoy coming to school.
- Parents are very supportive of the school. They are very pleased with the standards the school achieves and give practical help in classes.
- There is excellent provision for the pupils' personal development.
- The headteacher is a very effective leader and she is well supported by her senior management team and the governing body.

What could be improved

- The pupils need more opportunities to plan their own investigative science activities and to use their mathematical skills in real-life problems.
- The presentation of the pupils' work and the marking of work in some classes.
- The role of subject co-ordinators in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning.

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the governors' action plan.

HOW THE SCHOOL HAS IMPROVED SINCE ITS LAST INSPECTION

The previous inspection, which took place in May 1996, found St Nicholas to be a very good school that provided the pupils with a broad and balanced curriculum. The high standards attained by the pupils in English, mathematics and science at the end of both key stages have been sustained. The school's performance in National Curriculum tests has kept pace with national trends and the pupils' performance in reading, writing and mathematics is well above the national average. At the end of Key Stage 2, the pupils' performance is well above average in English and science and above average in mathematics. The good standards of teaching have been maintained. All of the issues from the previous inspection have been addressed very successfully. Standards in information technology and design and technology have improved significantly, the award of Beacon School status an indicator

of how far things have moved forward. Those pupils with special educational needs are given effective support both in class and, where appropriate, during small group withdrawal sessions.

STANDARDS

The table shows the standards achieved by 11 year olds based on average point scores in National Curriculum tests.

Performance in:	compared with				<i>Key</i>
	all schools			similar schools	
	1997	1998	1999	1999	
English	A*	A*	A	C	well above average A above average B average C below average D well below average E
mathematics	A	A*	A	A	
science	A*	A	A	A	

The 1999 test results for seven year olds show the pupils' performance in reading and writing was very high and in the top five per cent of schools nationally. Results in mathematics were also well above the national average. The test results for eleven year olds in the same year show the pupils' performance in English, mathematics and science to be well above the national average. The slightly lower English results – in line with similar schools, was due to the higher number of pupils with special educational needs. In English and science the proportion of pupils attaining the higher Level 5 is well above the national average and in mathematics it is very high. The children under five attain standards well above those expected. Inspection evidence confirms the high standards achieved in the school. The school is well on course to meet the challenging targets in English and mathematics.

PUPILS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	Very good. The pupils are keen to learn and talk enthusiastically about their school. They work hard on the tasks they have been set.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	Very good. The pupils behave very well during lessons and behaviour in the dining room and in the playground is very good.
Personal development and relationships	The relationships between pupils and between the pupils and staff are very good. The pupils demonstrate a mature attitude towards school.
Attendance	Very good. The pupils enjoy coming to school and are punctual ensuring a brisk start to the day.

There is a range of activities that the pupils undertake to support the running of the school. Together with educational visits, these activities help further their personal development.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of pupils:	aged up to 5 years	aged 5-7 years	aged 7-11 years
20 lessons seen overall	Good	Good	Good

Inspectors make judgements about teaching in the range: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; unsatisfactory; poor; very poor. 'Satisfactory' means that the teaching is adequate and strengths outweigh weaknesses.

Overall, the quality of teaching is good. In the lessons observed, 35 per cent of the teaching was good, 35 per cent very good and ten per cent was excellent. The rest was satisfactory. No unsatisfactory lessons were observed. The good and very good teaching was seen in both key stages whilst the excellent teaching was in Key Stage 2. In the Reception class and in Key Stage 1, the teachers have a good understanding of how the skills of literacy and numeracy should be taught. Reading skills are particularly well taught and teacher assessments and recording of skills are significant factors in aiding the pupils' development in this aspect of the curriculum. In Key Stage 2, the teachers build effectively on what has been taught in Key Stage 1 and the pupils achieve good skills in English and mathematics. They are well prepared for the National Curriculum tests. Occasionally, there is an over-reliance on work sheets that inhibit the opportunities for the pupils to plan aspects of their own learning. There is also a lack of consistency in the quality of marking and presentation by the pupils of their work. The needs of those pupils with special educational needs are effectively met through support from additional teaching and learning support staff. Higher attaining pupils achieve particularly well due to the quality of teaching in which there is high expectations of what the pupils can achieve. Average pupils also achieve work of a good standard due to effective monitoring of their progress and the setting of realistic targets. The structured curriculum and the good help given by parents in supporting their children's work through homework enables the pupils to make good progress throughout the school.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum	Good. All statutory requirements are met. Appropriate time is devoted to literacy and numeracy and to other subjects. The pupils would benefit from being given more opportunities to carry out investigative work in science and real-life mathematical activities.
Provision for pupils with special educational needs	Good. Assessment procedures are very effective and ensure that these pupils are provided with help from an early stage. The pupils are given good support and this enables them to make progress in line with their peers. The recommendations of the Code of Practice are fully met.
Provision for pupils' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	There is excellent provision for the pupils' personal development. The pupils take great pride in the support they provide for a range of charities and their spiritual development is effectively developed through assemblies and opportunities for quiet reflection.
How well the school cares for its pupils	There are very good procedures in place for monitoring the health and safety of pupils and child protection procedures are very good. The procedures for assessing the pupils' academic progress are very good. These procedures, and the effectiveness with which they are used, enables the teachers to ensure the pupils make the progress of which they are capable.

HOW WELL THE SCHOOL IS LED AND MANAGED

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff	The school is very well led by the headteacher. She has a very clear vision for the school and is very well supported by the staff and governors in her quest to sustain and to improve standards. There is a very positive ethos based on the firmly held Catholic beliefs and a commitment to high standards, reflected in the school's status as a Beacon school. There are plans to develop the role of subject co-ordinators in monitoring teaching and learning.
How well the governors fulfil their responsibilities	The governors fulfil their roles very effectively. They have a good understanding of the work of the school and a commitment to achieving high standards.
The school's evaluation of its performance	There is a very good evaluation of the National Curriculum test results and this information, together with the results of optional and standardised tests, is used to set targets for pupils. Comparisons are made with local schools to determine how well the school is performing. The headteacher monitors the quality of teaching.
The strategic use of resources	Very good use is made of the staff, resources and the building. Good use is made of staffing to enable the high standards in literacy and numeracy to be maintained. The development of the school's use of information technology has been excellent and has a significant impact on most areas of the curriculum. The school applies the principles of best value by seeking quotations for services and selecting the most cost effective options.

PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What parents would like to see improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The high standards achieved by their children and the good progress they make. • Their children like school and they are expected to work hard. • The good teaching. • The high standards of behaviour. • The leadership of the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The amount of homework given to their children. • The information provided about how their children are progressing and an arranged time for them to discuss the end of year report. • Opportunities for them to work closer with the school. • The range of out of school activities.

The inspection team endorses the positive comments made by the parents. The amount of homework is appropriate for the age and ability of the pupils. The reports are detailed and informative but some parents did not find them easy to understand. Some parents would like a date organised by the school to discuss their child's end of year report. A number of parents help in school and most support their children with homework tasks. The school always welcomes help from parents. There is a satisfactory range of activities taking place after school in addition to French, technology and other clubs taking place at lunchtime.

PART B: COMMENTARY

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

At the ages of seven and eleven the pupils achieve high standards in National Curriculum tests. The headteacher and staff are committed to sustaining these high standards and the pupils are well prepared for the tests.

1. When they start school, most children attain standards that are above those seen nationally. The good teaching in the Reception class develops the pupils' skills in literacy and numeracy. There is a good balance between teaching these basic skills and providing the children with a structured environment that enables them to develop their creative and physical skills. The emphasis on the teaching of reading pays dividends as the children move into Key Stage 1 and they develop a love of books and enjoy reading. The pupils are confident readers and will have a go at unfamiliar words. For example, in a good Year 1 lesson, a number of pupils used their phonic skills to have a good try with the pronunciation of 'Scaramouche'. The Year 2 pupils use basic punctuation accurately and their spellings and use of words is of a good standard. The pupils enjoy numeracy sessions and their mental recall skills are good. The pupils are prepared well for the National Curriculum tests at the end of the key stage and attain standards that are very high in reading and writing and well above the national average in mathematics.
2. At Key Stage 2, significant emphasis is placed on the teaching of English, mathematics and science. As in Key Stage 1, very effective use is made of the learning support assistants to ensure that groups of pupils are given the best possible support. The pupils benefit from teaching that is well matched to their specific needs. The special educational needs teacher targets small groups of pupils during literacy and numeracy sessions to enable them to make the best possible progress. The parents support their children effectively through ensuring homework is completed and returned to school. Just as in Key Stage 1, the pupils are well prepared for the National Curriculum tests through appropriate homework tasks and booster classes and they attain standards that are much better than the national average. In English and science, the proportion of pupils attaining the higher Level 5 is well above the national average. In mathematics, the proportion of pupils attaining the higher Level 5 is very high, placing the school in the top five per cent nationally.
3. The headteacher, staff and governors are conscious that they have set themselves a hard task in order to sustain the high standards. They are not complacent however, and are looking to implement a variety of strategies in order to maintain the standards demanded by the parents. Plans are already well-advanced to enable a member of staff to work alongside colleagues to develop subject expertise as part of its Beacon School status.

Overall, the quality of teaching is good with examples of very good and some excellent teaching.

4. The teaching of literacy and numeracy is rarely less than good and is frequently very good. The teachers have a very good understanding of the literacy and numeracy strategies and they plan their work very carefully to meet the needs of all pupils. The teachers enjoy a very good rapport with their pupils and this helps to instil considerable confidence. The teachers are always very well prepared, work extremely hard and manage the pupils very effectively, ensuring that behaviour is of a high standard. In the best lessons, the expectations of what the pupils can achieve are high and all pupils make the progress of which they are capable. Questioning is very effective and does not allow the pupils to respond with a simple 'Yes' or 'No'. In an excellent literacy lesson in Year 5, questions such as 'Can we expand on that?' and 'Yes, but how are they linked?' resulted in rapid progress of the pupils' understanding of main clauses and subordinate clauses. There was a similar use of effective questioning in a good Year 2 numeracy lesson that resulted in the pupils developing a very good understanding of co-ordinates. Where lessons are not as effective there is a tendency for teachers to make too much use of worksheets. Many of the worksheets do not allow the pupils to respond in full sentences or to think about how they might present their answers.

5. The way teachers use computers to enhance learning in other areas of the curriculum is a significant improvement since the last inspection. Teachers plan to use computers in literacy, numeracy, geography, science, history and design and technology and the quality of the work produced by the pupils is impressive. For example, as part of a project looking at the building of a slip road, the pupils in Year 4 and 5 used computers for word processing letters to the editor of a newspaper and council representatives and a publishing program for drawing maps of the area.

The pupils behave very well and have very positive attitudes towards their work.

6. The pupils behave very well in classrooms and around the school. In the dining room the pupils talk happily and the lunchtime is a very pleasant occasion. The teachers have high expectations of behaviour and the pupils live up to these expectations. The pupils enjoy their work and demonstrate a very positive attitude towards their work, particularly when they find the lessons enjoyable and interesting. When talking about history, several pupils enthused about the work they had covered on the Tudors, all of them agreeing when one said, 'She makes it really interesting'. They also talked enthusiastically about the work they had covered in design and technology and information technology and enjoyed the technology club that took place at lunchtime.
7. The pupils' behaviour and their positive attitudes towards work were all the more impressive as the inspection took place during a mini heat wave when classroom conditions were not conducive to 'hard work'. The pupils accepted the conditions and their commitment to work was noteworthy.

Attendance is very good, lessons start punctually and the pupils enjoy coming to school.

8. Attendance is very good. The pupils like coming to school and they arrive punctually enabling lessons to start on time. No time is wasted as pupils come in from lunch or when they move into different classrooms for specific activities.

Parents are very supportive of the school. They are very pleased with the standards the school achieves and give practical help in classes.

9. In the questionnaires completed and in their meetings with inspectors, the parents expressed their satisfaction with the standards achieved by their children. The parents are interested in the school and support their children effectively through homework activities. There is a thriving Parent and Friends Association that raises considerable amounts of money for the school. The parents also support their children when they are involved in fund raising activities for charities and this has a positive impact on the pupils' personal development.

There is excellent provision for the pupils' personal development.

10. The excellent provision for the pupils' spiritual, moral and social development has a significant impact on their personal development. The Catholic ethos of the school permeates much of the work and this is enhanced through work in assemblies. The teachers are very good role models and there is a clear understanding of right and wrong. The pupils are given opportunities to decide which charities will be supported and this too, enhances their personal development.

The headteacher is a very effective leader and she is well supported by her senior management team and the governing body.

11. The headteacher is a very effective leader. She knows her staff and pupils well and has a clear understanding of what the school does well and what could be improved. She is committed to raising standards and is clear about how this can be done. Considerable encouragement and support has been given to staff to raise standards. For example, the quality of work undertaken in information technology and design and technology has resulted in the school being awarded

Beacon status. As a result of the additional funding this has attracted, the headteacher has clear plans as to how this will be used to improve standards of teaching and learning in the school and to help other schools to improve. The governors are very effective in their roles and make a substantial contribution to the effectiveness of the school. The governors analyse the school's National Curriculum test results to see if they are as high as they should be and appropriate targets are set. The headteacher and governors manage the school's financial resources very effectively and consider carefully how to make the best use of staffing resources. They consider the financial implications of contracts and take action to ensure they get the best value for money.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

The pupils need more opportunities to plan their own investigative science activities and to use their mathematical skills in real-life problems.

12. There are only limited opportunities for the pupils to use the very good mathematical skills in real life learning situations. Considerable attention has been paid – and rightly so – to ensuring that all of the pupils develop good mental skills and a secure understanding of number. More could be done to challenge the pupils' thinking and let them apply their learning to problem solving activities. Similarly in science, pupils need to be presented with more opportunities to carry out investigative and experimental work. Many of the investigation that are carried out are over-directed by the teacher and the pupils have few opportunities to determine how the investigation should be planned and conducted. This is not to say that the work is the unsatisfactory, it is not, but the progress the pupils make, particularly the more able pupils, in these subjects would be greatly enhanced by allowing the pupils to take a greater lead.

The presentation of the pupils' work and the marking of work in some classes.

13. In some classes, the marking of the pupils' written work is of a very high standard and helps the pupils to improve their work. However, these high standards are not seen in all classes. At its best, the marking is a clear dialogue between the teacher and pupil. The marking indicates what the pupil is doing well and what might to be done to improve the work. Realistic targets for improvement are set and there is evidence that the teacher is monitoring the pupil's progress towards the targets. Where marking is less effective, the process of setting targets and monitoring of progress is not as clear. There is a strong link between the quality of marking and the presentation of the pupils' work. Where the marking is very good so is the presentation of the pupils' work. Corrections are completed and the work improves from week to week. Where this is not the case, there is not the same level of improvement and this is particularly so with the quality of handwriting and spelling. Occasionally, there is an over-reliance on the use of work sheets and this has an adverse effect on the presentation of the pupils' work.

The role of subject co-ordinators in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning.

14. The headteacher takes the lead in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school and this is effective. However, it has been recognised that subject co-ordinators would benefit from observing first hand more of what is happening in classrooms. Plans are already in place to train teachers to observe in classrooms as part of the school's self-evaluation process. The opportunity to observe teaching of the highest quality and for the best teachers to share their expertise will help to raise the standard of teaching even further.

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

The school should now:

- (1) Enhance the pupils' skills in investigative and practical science and mathematical activities by:

- providing the pupils with more opportunities to carry out science investigations;
 - balancing the amount of teacher direction and pupil investigation;
 - reducing the use of worksheets that overly direct the pupils to the required outcome;
 - providing the pupils with more opportunities to use their mathematical skills in real-life problem solving situations.
- (2) Improve the quality of marking and setting targets for improvement by:
- ensuring that the marking of the pupils' written work is consistent between classes;
 - ensuring realistic targets are set which enable the pupils to see what they need to do to improve their work.
- (3) Improve the monitoring of teaching and learning by:
- training teachers in the skills of classroom observations and the evaluation of teaching and learning;
 - setting agreed and specific criteria for monitoring teaching and learning;
 - ensuring teachers have the opportunity to view the best practice and enabling the best teachers to work alongside their colleagues to share their expertise.

PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	20
Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and pupils	11

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
10	35	35	20			

The table gives the percentage of teaching observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about lessons.

Information about the school's pupils

Pupils on the school's roll	YR – Y6
Number of pupils on the school's roll (FTE for part-time pupils)	253
Number of full-time pupils eligible for free school meals	9

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Special educational needs	YR – Y6
Number of pupils with statements of special educational needs	0
Number of pupils on the school's special educational needs register	16

English as an additional language	No of pupils
Number of pupils with English as an additional language	0

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No of pupils
Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	7
Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving	6

Attendance

Authorised absence

	%
School data	3.6
National comparative data	5.4

Unauthorised absence

	%
School data	0.0
National comparative data	0.5

Both tables give the percentage of half days (sessions) missed through absence for the latest complete reporting year.

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 1

Number of registered pupils in final year of Key Stage 1 for the latest reporting year	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
	1999	19	14	33

National Curriculum Test/Task Results		Reading	Writing	Mathematics
Numbers of pupils at NC level 2 and above	Boys	19	19	19
	Girls	14	14	14
	Total	33	33	33
Percentage of pupils at NC level 2 or above	School	100(100)	100(100)	100(100)
	National	82(80)	83(81)	87(84)

Teachers' Assessments		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of pupils at NC level 2 and above	Boys	19	19	19
	Girls	14	14	14
	Total	33	33	33
Percentage of pupils at NC level 2 or above	School	100(100)	100(100)	100(100)
	National	82(81)	86(85)	87(86)

Percentages in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 2

Number of registered pupils in final year of Key Stage 2 for the latest reporting year	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
	1999	20	13	33

National Curriculum Test/Task Results		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of pupils at NC level 4 and above	Boys	17	15	19
	Girls	12	11	12
	Total	29	26	31
Percentage of pupils at NC level 4 or above	School	88(100)	79(91)	94(93)
	National	70(65)	69(59)	78(69)

Teachers' Assessments		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of pupils at NC level 4 and above	Boys	17	16	17
	Girls	12	11	12
	Total	29	27	29
Percentage of pupils at NC level 4 or above	School	88(97)	82(94)	88(97)
	National	68(65)	69(65)	75(71)

Percentages in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Ethnic background of pupils

	No of pupils
Black – Caribbean heritage	
Black – African heritage	1
Black – other	3
Indian	
Pakistani	
Bangladeshi	
Chinese	
White	215
Any other minority ethnic group	4

This table refers to pupils of compulsory school age only.

Teachers and classes

Qualified teachers and classes: YR – Y6

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	9.6
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	26.4
Average class size	31.8

Education support staff: YR – Y6

Total number of education support staff	3.7
Total aggregate hours worked per week	101

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Exclusions in the last school year

	Fixed period	Permanent
Black – Caribbean heritage		
Black – African heritage		
Black – other		
Indian		
Pakistani		
Bangladeshi		
Chinese		
White		
Other minority ethnic groups		

This table gives the number of exclusions of pupils of compulsory school age, which may be different from the number of pupils excluded.

Financial information

Financial year	1999/2000
	£
Total income	427798
Total expenditure	457821
Expenditure per pupil	1796
Balance brought forward from previous year	45949
Balance carried forward to next year	15926

Results of the survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out

253

Number of questionnaires returned

121

Percentage of responses in each category

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school.	60	37	2	1	1
My child is making good progress in school.	56	40	3	1	
Behaviour in the school is good.	68	31			1
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.	44	40	11	2	3
The teaching is good.	68	29	2		1
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.	41	43	15		1
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.	55	33	8	2	2
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.	78	22			
The school works closely with parents.	36	48	12	3	2
The school is well led and managed.	68	26	5	1	1
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.	63	33	2		2
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.	28	42	22	2	7

Other issues raised by parents

Some parents indicated they would like a pre-arranged date on which they could discuss their child's end of year report.

Some parents were unsure what the term 'working towards' means in relation to their child's attainment and would like more clarification in the reports.