



St Mary's School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number 133653
LEA East Sussex
Inspection number 275241
Inspection dates 9 - 10 June 2005
Reporting inspector Dr Mick Megee

Inspection deemed to have been carried out under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996 according to section 12(3) of the same act.

Type of School	Non-maintained	School address	Wrestwood Road
School category	Special School		Bexhill-on-Sea
Age range of pupils	7 - 19		East Sussex
			TN40 2LU
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01424 730740
Number on roll	129	Fax number	01424 733575
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	The Right Reverend David Wilcox
Date of previous inspection	January 1998	Principal	Mr David Cassar

Age group	Published	Reference no.
7 - 19	June 2005	275241

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Introduction

The inspection was a pilot of the new arrangements for inspection announced by Ofsted in its consultation paper of February 2004. It was carried out with the support and co-operation of St Mary's School and the Board of Trustees of St Mary's Wrestwood Children's Trust.

The inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

Description of the school

St Mary's is a non-maintained mixed special school in Bexhill for pupils with speech, language and social communication difficulties. Many pupils have additional areas of need, including moderate learning difficulties, physical disability, hearing impairment, autistic spectrum disorders or complex medical difficulties. Pupils are admitted from all parts of the United Kingdom. All of the 129 pupils have a statement of special educational need and nearly all take advantage of the school's age-appropriate boarding provision. The school has 32 pupils and students from minority ethnic backgrounds. Their language needs do not differ from those of the other pupils.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

St Mary's gives pupils an outstanding education. The principal and senior managers are very aware of how good the school is and have many excellent ideas for further ways to improve. They work tirelessly to make sure that pupils are happy and self-assured – this great strength is an example of a feature identified by the school before the inspection, and the inspection team fully agrees. Teaching is good overall with many outstanding features. All staff expect great things from the pupils, and the pupils rise to the challenge and rarely disappoint. Therapists, classroom and residential staff work hard together to pinpoint each pupil's particular needs. Pupils achieve well because they receive expert help and a broad range of rich experiences. Parents unanimously support everything the school does. They are grateful for the many extra steps that all the staff take to keep them fully in touch, even over a great distance.

The school has a very strong capacity to improve further and this is demonstrated by the transformations which have taken place since the last report. Since the last inspection, standards have continued to rise: English, science and information and communication technology have all substantially improved, as well as the teaching and learning for pupils of primary age. St Mary's provides outstanding value for money and inspectors agree with the school's view of its accomplishments.

Grade: 1

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

St Mary's has effective post-16 provision, known as St Mary's College, and students may transfer to it from the main school or move there from other schools. Progress is good. Teachers have a good grasp of their subjects and make their lessons rewarding for students who are very enthusiastic about their learning. 'Facilitators' – staff who work in both the classroom and in the boarding areas - provide effective help when it is needed. Signing and technological aids are used well in most lessons to assist students with hearing or communication difficulties to express choice, make decisions and respond to questions. Students are given good opportunities at local colleges to pursue alternative courses and to experience life in the mainstream. The long-term absence of senior staff means that the college is not yet as highly effective as the main school. However, the principal and the head of the college have already taken action to move things forward.

Grade: 2

Effectiveness and efficiency of boarding provision

Boarding provision at St Mary's is very effective. In the school's last welfare inspection in November 2004, it was judged to comply very well with the National Minimum Standards for boarding. Pupils and care staff like and understand each other, and are very comfortable in each other's presence. A homely but well-organised atmosphere has been created in all the boarding areas. Pupils are encouraged to share in drawing-up routines and making decisions about what goes on. Parents speak highly of the way in which they can contact their children and staff at any time, with pupils having free access to telephones at all times. The senior staff responsible for boarding have a very good understanding of the pupils' welfare. They are very conscious that many of the pupils are a long way away from their families and succeed in providing them with a warm, loving environment away from home. At the same time, they ensure that no opportunity is missed for giving pupils responsibilities and fostering their independence.

Staff are continually encouraged to update their skills and are given time off for their studies. They have a real feel for what the pupils need in order to develop self-reliance. Students who are almost ready to live independently move into one of the two houses in town so that they can gain experience of life in the real world. Students know about, and agree with, any restrictions that may be placed upon them, and know what they have to do in order to be fully trusted. A recent report highlighted one or two minor gaps in the record-keeping arrangements and these omissions were rectified straightaway.

The senior managers make sure that care staff are fully involved in the pupils' school work and, in the sixth form, staff known as 'facilitators' work in both school and in boarding areas. This is typical of the senior managers' desire to continually improve the experience for pupils through innovative means. The supervision and mentoring of new care staff is very well organised.

The quality of boarding accommodation is outstanding. The rooms are spacious, well lit and attractive. Pupils are very proud of their rooms and are given the choice of whether they want to share with others. Many do this because they enjoy the company of their close friends.

Since the last inspection, the school has continued to improve the residential provision, widening the range of accommodation and re-equipping and refurbishing rooms. It remains a great strength of the school.

Grade: 1

What the school should do to improve further

- Make the college as effective as the school.
- Make regular checks to see if different groups learn at different rates.

Achievement and standards

Pupils enter the school at various ages, with communication difficulties and additional learning needs that have slowed down their progress. Once in the school they begin to make faster progress and, given their capabilities and starting points, achieve well throughout their time in the school and college. Staff, therapists, parents, pupils and students get together to set demanding individual targets, for example in language and personal development. Because of the expert assistance they receive, all pupils make very good progress against these targets and there is good progress in all subjects.

Results in examinations for pupils in Years 10 and 11 and for students in the sixth form are below the national figure for all pupils, but they are better than one would expect in schools similar to St Mary's. Learners make good progress given their capabilities and starting points. Inspectors did not find any difference in the progress made by girls or boys, those from different backgrounds, or those with additional special needs, although the school does not monitor achievement in a way that would make certain no group is at a disadvantage.

Grade: 2

Personal development and well-being

All staff take great care to see that pupils and students become socially and morally responsible. They receive constant, sensible informal guidance, are given responsibility for important tasks and the message is reinforced in lessons. The school very successfully fosters pupils' spiritual and religious feelings through lessons and acts of collective worship. The chair of governors is a senior church leader who organises and leads excellently innovative 'Days of Wonder', when pupils and students undertake activities that thrill and inspire them and which teach them to respect and care for others. The rich range of events outside of lessons, especially visits, provide excellent opportunities for developing awareness of the wider world. Pupils and students broaden their understanding of others' cultures through themed 'culture days'.

The school enhances pupils' self-esteem by giving them what they need to become competent communicators and increasingly independent and confident.

Pupils take great pleasure in all aspects of school and college life. They do not miss lessons; they always turn up on time and behave well. When asked about bullying, pupils said, "What bullying?"

The school council provides pupils with valuable opportunities to influence decisions and prepares them to participate in their own communities. Pupils have persuaded the school to introduce playground buddies and menu boards. The strong focus on keeping safe and healthy living, means that pupils and students are taught what to do if they are in vulnerable situations and how to make sensible lifestyle choices. Work experience and mini-enterprise activities help to prepare pupils and students well for further education or employment.

Grade: 1

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are good. The learners themselves, parents, teachers, a range of therapists and residential care workers all make a contribution to the individual learning programmes. This process gives a very clear picture of what each pupil needs and lessons can be accurately customised. In almost all lessons, carefully chosen activities enable pupils to learn new skills and gain knowledge and understanding in a structured and systematic way. In a few lessons, the targets are not precise enough.

Pupils and staff work together very well and teachers expect high standards of behaviour and work. An outstanding feature of lessons is the sensitive and skilful way in which therapists blend their essential programmes into lessons, so that pupils do not miss anything.

Behaviour management is rarely required, because pupils are so positive and eager to learn. The activities in lessons are suitably demanding and staff know when to provide support and when to stand back and encourage independence. Most staff make sure that pupils' communication needs are taken care of, but occasionally, staff forget to make their meaning clear by signing throughout the lesson.

Teachers have effective systems for observing, checking and recording what pupils have learned and how much progress they are making. Subject leaders successfully make sure that there is consistency between teachers in the judgements they make.

Grade: 2

Curriculum and other activities

Pupils receive an extremely good education at St Mary's. Senior managers ensure that pupils have a very interesting range of subjects and opportunities to learn. In the sixth form, the education is good but not yet as finely tuned as lower down the school. There is not yet sufficient emphasis on creative experiences, such as music and art. The school has set up very good links with local colleges that provide a taste of further education and afford an excellent opportunity to select from a wide range of courses.

Pupils develop a very good understanding of how to stay safe and healthy, and there is a good focus on preparing them for the future through work-related activities like careers education and work experience.

There is a very good range of activities outside of lessons which nearly all pupils and students attend and enjoy. Some of these activities result in them achieving wide recognition such as their 'Boy Band'. Those involved recorded a CD of pop music and this was featured on local television. Visits to places of interest bring learning alive, and residential visits provide valuable additional opportunities for social development.

Grade: 1

Care, guidance and support

The school provides an outstanding level of care, guidance and support. Education, therapy, medical and care staff work together very closely so that pupils' needs are recognised, shared and managed exceedingly well. Consequently, pupils and students are in the best possible position to learn. The school, college and residential environments are run very effectively so that they are very safe and secure, and pupils and students flourish. Staff follow child protection procedures to the letter. Pupils report that they feel very well looked after and know what to do if they have concerns or worries. This includes the opportunity to talk to 'playground buddies', who are easily recognised by their blue wristbands.

In school, pupils receive expert support based on detailed assessment records. Teachers use this information to set testing targets and to help pupils develop an understanding of what they need to do to improve. College students are supported well, and are kept well informed about future options that may be available to them.

Grade: 1

Leadership and management

Leadership and management at St Mary's School are outstanding overall and management is good in the sixth form. The principal has extensive responsibilities beyond the school as he also runs the charitable trust which supports the school. He carries out his duties with extraordinary inspiration, diligence and skill, and receives terrific support from governors and from the senior leadership group. Those who form the group are very knowledgeable and they share the principal's passion and commitment to raise standards even further. Together, the governors, principal and senior staff have led significant school improvements. They aspire to much more and know what they need to do. The school improvement plan is very comprehensive, and parents' views of the school are regularly sought and taken into account.

All staff have their performance fairly judged and managed and all work to achieve common aims. There was much camaraderie in evidence during the inspection. Every member of staff is consulted about the future of the school, as are parents, pupils and students. However, managers have not compared the achievement made by different groups of pupils. Doing this regularly makes maintaining and improving the good progress of pupils more secure. The school has bold plans to start up a business enterprise in town. Resources are very well managed and excellent value for money is achieved. There are outstanding links with external agencies and with the local community.

Governance of the school is outstanding. The governing body and its supporting committees keep themselves very well informed, give the school a very clear steer and make challenging demands on the senior staff to drive the school forward. They have tried very hard, so far without success, to persuade the LEA to provide a representative to attend meetings so that they can forge even stronger links with local schools.

Grade: 1

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INSPECTION JUDGEMENTS

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate.</i>	School Overall	16-19
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OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	1	2
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The quality and standards in the Foundation Stage	NA	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	Yes	Yes
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

ACHIEVEMENT AND STANDARDS

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The <i>standards</i> * reached by learners	4	4
How well learners make <i>progress</i> , taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

THE QUALITY OF PROVISION

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	2

* *Standards reached by learners are below national average but learners achieve well given their capabilities and starting points.*

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets, through quality assurance and self-review	1	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
The adequacy and suitability of staff to ensure that learners are protected	Yes	Yes

The extent to which schools enable learners to be healthy	
Learners are encouraged and enabled to eat and drink healthily.	Yes
Learners are encouraged and enabled to take regular exercise.	Yes
Learners are discouraged from smoking and substance abuse.	Yes
Learners are educated about sexual health.	Yes
The extent to which providers ensure that learners stay safe.	
Procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements.	Yes
Risk assessment procedures and related staff training are in place.	Yes
Action is taken to reduce anti-social behaviour, such as bullying and racism.	Yes
Learners are taught about key risks and how to deal with them.	Yes
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution	
Learners are helped to develop stable, positive relationships.	Yes
Learners, individually and collectively, participate in making decisions that affect them.	Yes
Learners are encouraged to initiate, participate in and manage activities in school and the wider community	Yes
The extent to which schools enable learners to achieve economic well-being	
There is provision to promote learners' basic skills.	Yes
Learners have opportunities to develop enterprise skills and work in teams.	Yes
Careers education and guidance is provided to all learners in Key Stage 3 and 4 and the sixth form.	Yes
Education for all learners aged 14-19 provides an understanding of employment and the economy.	Yes

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St Mary's School
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11 June 2005

Dear pupils and students

Thank you for welcoming us to your school and for helping us to do our job. We really enjoyed seeing you work and talking to you. You made us feel very much at home. A special thanks to those on the School Council who met with us and who explained so clearly what you think about your school and all the very good things it does.

This is what we found out about your school:

- we believe your school is especially good
- you love everything about your school and have no worries even if you are a long way from home
- the adults in the school listen closely to your ideas to make things better
- you do well at school because the adults provide you with the right help when you need it
- the principal and the people with responsibility work very hard and run the school really well.

Even though your school is especially good, there are two or three things which the principal can do to make it even better.

- in the college, you need more time to be creative say in art, music, dance or drama
- the principal ought to make absolutely sure that everyone makes the same good progress whether they are girl or boy, old or young, or from a different culture.

Can you try to help the school to put these things right? We hope you agree with us. Thank you again for all your help.

Mick Megee
Lead Inspector