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Inspection Report

**Better
education
and care**

Unique Reference Number 118778
LEA Kent
Inspection number 280388
Inspection dates 7 June 2006 to 7 June 2006
Reporting inspector Patricia Davies AI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 which gives Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools the authority to inspect any school in England. The inspection is to be treated as a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Primary	School address	South Park
School category	Voluntary aided		Sevenoaks
Age range of pupils	4 to 11		Kent TN13 1EH
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01732 453921
Number on roll	222	Fax number	01732 460501
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mr Sean Corrigan
Date of previous inspection	1 May 2006	Headteacher	Mrs Elizabeth Baldock

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one inspector. In the course of the day's visit, the inspector met with senior and key staff, the chair of the governing body and members of the school council, and attended an assembly. Several lessons were visited and the inspector observed pupils in the playground and looked at a range of pupils' work, assessment information and other documentation. One hundred and twenty questionnaires were received from parents.

Description of the school

St Thomas is an average-sized primary school serving three Catholic parishes. With some variation, attainment on entry to the Reception class is generally above the attainment of other children of a similar age. The overall attainment of other year groups is sometimes affected by pupils moving in and out of the school at other times. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties is below average overall, but also varies across year groups. Most pupils are from White British backgrounds. Others come from a variety of different countries and almost all speak English well. The headteacher took up her position in September 2005, having been deputy headteacher at the school.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Thomas is a lively, forward-looking school with a strongly developed sense of community. As one parent tellingly wrote, 'St Thomas manages to provide a stimulating and caring environment for its pupils.' Pupils, too, are quick to point to its warmth and friendliness. Those who joined the school part-way through their primary education confirmed how well they had been supported by other pupils when they first arrived, and one enthusiastically explained how their appointed 'buddy' remains their best friend. Younger pupils, too, appreciate how much time the older pupils give to playing with them at break times. The impact of this highly supportive environment is evident in pupils' confidence, good behaviour and enjoyment of school life. Pupils' careful attention to presentations and musical accomplishments illustrated clearly how much they value and respect the achievements of others.

At the heart of the school lies its Catholic foundation, which plays a major role in developing the pupils' good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The quality of pastoral and personal care and respect for others, instilled by the school's Christian ethos, is outstanding, and was demonstrated eloquently when the school came together for its assembly. A wide and varied curriculum is enriched by musical events, sporting activities and exciting art and design projects where pupils work alongside visiting artists. These experiences substantially enrich pupils' cultural appreciation. The link with a school in Tanzania is a very special feature of the school's work to extend pupils' awareness of other cultures and traditions in the world. At the same time, pupils are developing essential skills for use when they grow up. What better than to have to work together to plan, produce and perform an opera, even down to creating a programme and arranging the ticket sales? Good teamwork is also essential in the school orchestra, and in the beginners' recorder group, which played faultlessly in assembly.

The headteacher gives clear-sighted and well-focused leadership to an enthusiastic and determined staff. She has swiftly created a leadership structure that has started to maintain a comprehensive check and influence on the quality of the school's work. The school is well aware that it must now extend the scope of its monitoring activities, particularly of teaching and learning. Leadership and monitoring skills are rapidly being developed among senior and subject leaders, using national training programmes and expertise from the local authority. Innovative approaches, like the introduction of temporary working groups to review and develop particular projects, allow other teachers the chance to take on leadership responsibility. Senior staff members are present in the capacity of team members and, therefore, on hand to guide and support. The newly-formed governors' monitoring committee is already proving to be a powerful tool for drawing governors and staff together to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the school's initiatives. Thorough assessment arrangements and robust analysis of data ensure that the school has an accurate view of its academic performance and what it needs to do next to improve. There is also a ready willingness to re-examine existing practices and re-adjust where necessary to get things right. These qualities have enabled the school to focus successfully, for example, on improving the quality

of pupils' writing and increasing the attainment of more able pupils. Achievement as a whole is good, with pupils of all abilities progressing equally well. Standards in the current Year 6 are high.

Teaching and learning are good, although there are some inconsistencies in expectations about the presentation of pupils' work and acceptable levels of noise in lessons. Teaching is at its most dynamic when pupils' ideas and creativity are heightened by the use of drama. Pupils worked together with great excitement to dramatise a poem, for example, with the content of the poem drawing neatly on their enthusiasm about the World Cup! Activities of this kind represent one of the successful ways in which the school is improving writing. Another initiative has been to focus on developing the more challenging subject skills, such as the analysis of character and setting in books, problem solving in mathematics, and investigation in science. These approaches have been particularly successful with higher-attaining pupils, and are exceptionally well established at Year 6. High levels of motivation and maturity are evident in this group. They complete a substantial quantity of work, write at length in a wide range of contexts and approach their tasks with considerable thought and imagination.

A good level of challenge for teachers and pupils is also generated by the school's rigorous target-setting systems. Senior staff members are involved in this process and are constantly seeking to fine tune their approach so that National Curriculum targets are spot on. This sharper-edged numerical approach is proving to be successful. However, the assessment of the learning needs of individual pupils is not yet as well developed and, while pupils say that they have learning targets, they do not always know what they are. A start has already been made to extending assessment in this way. For example, marking often gives pupils very useful information about how their work could be improved. There are also examples of pupils evaluating their own work and the work of others but, in each case, these practices are not yet a consistent experience for all pupils.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Having entered the Reception year with attainment generally above the level of children of this age, pupils go on to make good progress as they move through the school. National test results for Year 2 have tended to be significantly above average and test standards at Year 6 have risen over recent years to a high level, which is replicated in the present Year 6 group. Where standards in these tests have been lower, this is because particular year groups sometimes contain a higher-than-usual proportion of pupils with learning difficulties. This is true of last year's Year 6, for example, and the current group of Year 2 pupils. Nevertheless, test data and the school's assessment information show these pupils to have made good overall progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

The school has worked successfully over the course of this year to improve attendance, and its target has been exceeded. Attendance is now above average and is another illustration of pupils' motivation and enjoyment of life at school. Pupils understand the benefits of eating fresh fruit and vegetables at school, of having the opportunity to swim in each year from Reception onwards and of the need for safety precautions while the outdoor learning area is being built. The work of the school council allows every pupil a voice in decisions about the school community. As one pupil remarked, 'All the school co-operates and gets along well.' Close links with a school for pupils with special educational needs give pupils at St Thomas a real opportunity to make a contribution within the local community.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Lively teaching in the Reception class ensures a busy working atmosphere. 'Tricky' questions pose just the right level of challenge. Good independent learning habits are shown in how confidently children work alone and with others – and shut down the computer without any trouble at all when it's time to stop!

Pupils say they are pleased with the help they receive in lessons and particularly like the way teachers explain things clearly. They work together sensibly and productively, and confidently share their ideas with each other. Pupils also concentrate hard much of the time, but are sometimes allowed to get too noisy so that their attention is then, sometimes, distracted.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The varied and colourful displays around the school are a testament to a wide and stimulating curriculum, which includes the opportunity to learn to speak French. The basic curriculum is well planned, and there are good links between subjects, which the school is seeking to strengthen further. History projects, for instance, give pupils opportunities to use and develop writing and research skills, just as scientific investigations make good use of numeracy skills. Visits to other schools also extend pupils' experience, which they use, for example, to produce PowerPoint presentations. The emphasis on drama and music has enabled pupils to speak or play a musical instrument confidently in front of others. Funding has been harvested to give the youngest children an exciting outdoor learning area, which is almost completed.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Child protection arrangements are well known and there is closely-focused support for pupils with particular learning and behavioural needs, which includes the use of outside agencies. Pupils say that any incidents of bullying are quickly resolved. Academic guidance is rapidly developing so that pupils know how they can improve and play a central role in assessing their achievement along side staff.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The leadership team is conscientious, enthusiastic and reflective, and this same approach is manifest among governors. Decisions are considered with great care so that, even though difficulties with class sizes could not be fully resolved, the school has done all it can to come up with the best solution. Financial management has been tackled in the same way, so that the school has a clear view of all its options for planning within financial constraints. The pace and impact of improvements over this academic year show that the school is well placed to move forward into the future.

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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?	2	NA
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	NA
The quality and standards in foundation stage	2	NA
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	NA
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	Yes	NA
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	NA

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	NA
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	NA
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	NA
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	NA

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

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

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

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

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	NA
Education for all learners aged 14–19 provides an understanding of employment and the economy	NA

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to your school. I was very pleased to have the chance to talk with some of you, listen to your presentations in assembly, look at your work and visit lessons. Thank you for being so welcoming. I am sending this letter to tell you what I found out about your school.

What your school does well:

- Your school is an extremely warm and friendly community and you told me that you think this is one of its real strengths.
- You do lots to help each other out, work very well together and enjoy each other's achievements, as you did during assembly.
- As well as taking extremely good care of you, adults also help you to do well in your work – in fact some of you told me that teachers explain things really clearly and help you out in lessons if you don't understand.
- You take part in lots of interesting and exciting activities, and you really enjoy the lessons where teachers use drama to help you learn.
- Members of staff have worked hard to improve your writing and make sure those of you who find work easier than others are always challenged to do your very best.

There are some things your school could do to make it even better. For example, it could make sure that you always have some information about how you can improve your work. In fact, some of you are already evaluating how well you and your classmates have done, and it would be really helpful if you all did this as a matter of course. Members of staff also want to keep a much closer check on how well you are doing in lessons. This approach would be especially helpful to make sure, for example, that your work is always tidy and you don't sometimes get too noisy in lessons.

With very best wishes for the future.