

Inspection report

St Joseph's Convent Preparatory School

Independent school

DfES ref no: 886/6041

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 23 - 26 January 2006

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002 in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school. An inspection of the nursery provision in the Pre-Prep department under section 122 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 was carried out at the same time. A full report on this inspection will be published separately.

Information about the school

St Joseph's Convent Preparatory School is a co-educational school for boys and girls aged from 3 to 11 years. At the time of the inspection, there were 196 full-time pupils and 10 part-time pupils on roll. The school's origins go back to 1899 when the Roman Catholic order, the Sisters of Mercy, opened a school based on religious principles. The school moved to its present site in 1943. As the school grew in numbers a number of additional buildings were erected. The school is based on Christian principles.

The school's mission statement states that it aims *'to maintain a Christian environment where: our children grow and develop into caring individuals; they learn to discover their individual gifts and talents; they will value respect for others in the knowledge that we are all children of God; they will be secure in the knowledge that each has a role to play in the school and a valued contribution to make to its life.'*

Summary of main findings

The school is particularly successful in its provision for pupils' personal development. Pupils' moral and social development is good. They are outstandingly well behaved, self-disciplined, polite, courteous and friendly. The school provides a safe, caring and well-ordered environment in which pupils are happy and able to learn and flourish. Pupils attain above average standards in national tests at the end of Year 2 and Year 6. The curriculum is broad and balanced in most respects, but there is insufficient provision for the technological area of learning. The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall with some good teaching. Systems for monitoring and evaluating the curriculum and teaching and learning are undeveloped, as leadership and management of aspects of the school's work are insufficiently devolved, including subject leadership. Parents are satisfied with the education the school provides, but would like more information about the curriculum and their children's progress. The overall provision in the Pre-Prep department is satisfactory.

What the school does well:

- it creates an orderly, well-disciplined but warm and friendly atmosphere in which learning can take place;
- its pupils attain high standards in national tests;

- its staff form supportive relationships with their pupils and know them very well;
- its teachers are successful in fostering pupils' enjoyment of school and their positive attitudes towards learning; and
- it provides very good opportunities for pupils' moral and social development.

What the school must do in order to comply with the regulations:

- develop the curriculum documentation and guidance, and improve the quality of provision for information and communication technology (ICT), as indicated in section 1 of the report;
- provide pupils with a broad general knowledge of public institutions and services in England;
- attend to the welfare issues identified in section 3;
- initiate Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks as early as possible in the staff appointments procedure to minimise delay;
- ensure that there are sufficient washrooms for staff and pupils; and
- ensure that parents and others are aware that the information detailed in section 6 is available on request.

What the school must do to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002:

- *set out a detailed three-year plan to improve the accessibility of the premises.*

Next Steps

Whilst not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- provide further opportunities for teachers to develop their teaching skills and to share good practice;
- establish an appraisal system; and
- provide a policy and planned programme for personal social, and health education.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The school successfully provides a broad curriculum in most respects, with an emphasis on the teaching of English and mathematics, but there is insufficient provision for the technological area of learning. The curriculum in the Foundation Stage (Pre-Prep and Prep 1) is based on the nationally agreed areas of learning for this age group, and the emphasis on successfully developing language and mathematical skills begins there. In Years 1 - 6 (Prep 2 to Junior 4), the curriculum covers all National Curriculum subjects, but is not yet fully effective because there is too much variation in the way subjects are planned. There is a curriculum statement in the prospectus, but there are no policies or schemes of work for some subjects, including ICT and religious education (RE). There are few systems for monitoring the curriculum, and no subject leaders to assume this role. This leaves teachers without specific guidance about what should be taught, when and how.

Planning for a range of subjects is based on commercial programmes, and while this helps to ensure continuity between teachers and year groups, the content sometimes lacks imagination or relevance. The school also makes use of the units in the national guidance provided by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), but their use is also dependent on teachers' choice, and they are not in themselves sufficient to ensure planning to build pupils' skills and knowledge in a systematic way. In ICT, where no commercial scheme is in use, teaching is too dependent on the individual teacher's experience and enthusiasm. This is exacerbated by a lack of up-to-date resources such as a broadband facility to allow wider Internet access. There is no written policy for personal, social and health education, although the caring atmosphere of the school and the emphasis on moral and social development mean that pupils' personal development is good. The school provides some opportunities for pupils to take responsibility in caring for others and helping around the school, but this aspect is underdeveloped. Physical education (PE), French and music, taught by specialist teachers, successfully enhance the curriculum.

In Pre-Prep and Prep 1, the provision for the areas of learning is satisfactory, with strengths in language acquisition. However, in some classes pupils are not given sufficient opportunity to make choices about the activities they will do, and to develop their independence. Access to outdoor play and to a range of activities which would extend the curriculum into the outdoor area is limited, in some classes because of timetabling, and in others because of the difficulties of supervision. To some extent, this limits opportunities for pupils' physical development.

Pupils with special educational needs are well catered for, especially as the school knows all pupils very well. Teachers plan work for pupils' differing needs, and ensure that all can make progress because of the attention they are able to give in small classes. However, understanding of the needs of pupils who are learning English as an additional language is underdeveloped, and some of these pupils do not make the progress of which they are capable, as their needs are not directly

addressed. Pupils with particular gifts and talents have been identified, and activities and clubs are provided for them. There is a good range of extra-curricular clubs, including sporting, musical and academic activities. Pupils are enthusiastic about their participation in these. One pupil said *'I don't even know which to choose. I'm busy three nights a week.'* Parents are pleased with the overall quality of education which the school provides, and in particular the focus on high standards in English and mathematics and the way the school promotes their children's confidence, good manners and excellent behaviour.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall, including in the Foundation Stage. Some good teaching was seen. Overall, however, approaches to teaching lack consistency across the school, with staff too often following their own preferred styles and methods. The school lacks a clear policy on teaching and learning to guide and develop effective classroom practice, although the teachers are beginning to use the same lesson planning format.

In the Foundation Stage teaching is satisfactory but there is some variation in quality. Teachers are sometimes over-directive and there are too few opportunities for pupils to make choices and develop independence. The teaching of communication, language and literacy is strong. Very good opportunities are provided to develop speaking, reading and writing skills. Staff are good at extending pupils' role play and they form very good relationships with their pupils. They know them very well.

In Years 1 - 6 teaching is satisfactory in the majority of subjects and classes. It is often good in lessons where specialist subject teaching takes place. The quality of teaching was unsatisfactory in only one of the lessons observed. All the staff form very positive relationships with their pupils and know them very well and this leads to a calm and purposeful environment in which most pupils are comfortable to ask questions and in which they are very willing to answer questions. Consequently, pupils are confident speakers with a good command of language. The strength of the teaching lies in the warm family atmosphere created by the teachers so that pupils work in harmony and support each other in learning. Teachers are very successful in encouraging pupils to behave well and to undertake their schoolwork in a diligent fashion. The favourable adult-to-pupil ratio in classes enables teachers to give all pupils individual attention. The teachers provide good support for individual pupils, especially for those experiencing difficulties in learning. Teachers manage time wisely and lessons start on time.

In the better lessons, the teachers plan clear learning outcomes which are shared with the pupils. In these lessons teachers use good questioning techniques to make pupils think and to elicit considered responses. More skilful questioning also checks on progress and the extent of pupils' understanding. More effective teachers use a good range of stimulating activities to engage and sustain pupils' interest.

In the weaker lessons, the objectives are not always clear, shared fully with pupils or revisited in an effective plenary at the end of the lesson. In these lessons, the main activity, such as a written task, continues for too long, which leaves too little time for

using other teaching strategies. When teaching is less effective, teachers depend too much on pupils working through, usually on their own, commercial workbooks and the work is not always matched to the ability level of the pupils. This means that pupils, especially the more able, are not always making as much progress as they could. Often lessons involve teaching the whole class together with too few teachers using different groupings such as pair and group work. In a few lessons, teachers are unwittingly discouraging, as they do not give pupils sufficient credit for providing an answer to a question, when the response is mistaken. Not all teachers have a secure grasp of the pupils' different learning styles and needs.

Pupils make good progress and achieve well in English and mathematics. Progress in other subjects is variable. Pupils are very enthusiastic and eager to learn. Pupils have achieved above average standards in national tests at the ages of 7 and 11.

The quality of assessment, including in the Foundation Stage, is satisfactory. The school uses the Foundation Stage profiles as guidance for the assessment of its younger pupils at the end of each term. In Years 1 - 6 regular testing occurs in English and mathematics and the school uses the optional national tests in Years 3, 4 and 5. Records are kept of test results especially in aspects of English and mathematics, but too few records of achievement are maintained on other curriculum subjects. The school uses National Curriculum level descriptors well as benchmarks in core subjects, but teachers do not routinely refer to these levels in other subjects. As a result, pupils are not sufficiently informed of their own progress. Marking and ongoing oral feedback is used well to praise and encourage, but marking too rarely indicates clearly to pupils exactly how to improve. The setting of personal targets and systems to track the progress made by each pupil, and to use this information to inform the planning of lessons, is undeveloped. Staff would benefit from further training in gathering and using assessment information to help pupils achieve even better.

The school is adequately resourced with books but makes too little use of audio-visual resources to stimulate interest and support learning. The computers are underused which restricts the opportunities for pupils to extend their skills in independent research. The dispersal of computers around the school, with none grouped together in a specialist room, prevents pupils from rapidly and systematically developing their ICT skills.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school meets most but not all of the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply in full with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *ensure that all subjects of the curriculum are supported by policies and schemes of work (paragraph 1(2)); and*
- *improve the quality of provision for ICT (paragraph 1(2)(a)(ii)).*

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Provision for pupils' moral and social development is good. The school helps pupils to develop into mature young people who are able to think for themselves, to distinguish between right and wrong and to obey rules. The headteacher and staff set high expectations of behaviour which all pupils meet very successfully. The teachers are very successful in fostering pupils' enjoyment of school and their very positive attitudes towards learning. The pupils enjoy good relationships with their teachers and feel free to contribute in class. The school is successful in helping its pupils to develop their self-esteem and self-confidence. All pupils, even the youngest, are courteous, polite, friendly and at ease with visitors.

Pupils are helped to understand their responsibilities to others and to the broader community. They are given some opportunities to exercise responsibility and to display initiative, for example helping to organise fundraising events for those in need. This is reinforced appropriately with visits from the police and fire services. The pupils willingly contribute to the school life, for example at lunch times many volunteer to give out cutlery and to collect it and used crockery afterwards. The school provides good opportunities for pupils' social development outside the school community having links with other schools, for example, to play inter-school matches. However, the school does not provide a planned programme to enable pupils to acquire a broad knowledge of public institutions and services.

The provision for pupils' spiritual and cultural development is satisfactory. Spiritual and cultural education is enhanced through morning assemblies, where some festivals from different religious traditions are celebrated. Circle time makes a useful contribution to the spiritual development of the younger pupils through encouraging them to explore and talk about their own experiences with their peers. Pupils react positively to praise and rewards, which raises their self-esteem and sense of pride in their work. Opportunities to promote pupils' spiritual development across the curriculum are not fully exploited. The RE programme for non-Catholic pupils is underdeveloped. Too little activity is undertaken, across the curriculum, to broaden all pupils' understanding of different cultural traditions. Although RE helps some pupils gain an understanding of life in a multi-cultural society, other planned opportunities are insufficient, for example through art, literature and educational visits.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school meets all but one of the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply fully with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *provide pupils with a broad general knowledge of public institutions and services in England (paragraph 2(d)).*

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The school provides a safe and caring place for pupils to learn. Staff know pupils very well, and form good relationships with them, allowing them to develop their confidence and self-esteem.

There is a range of policies for this aspect of the school's work, which are understood and followed by staff. The majority of these are fully implemented. The behaviour policy results in excellent behaviour across the school. Registers and accident records are carefully kept and risk assessments done for visits outside the school. Fire safety is taken seriously and the required safety checks are carried out regularly. There is a policy for child protection, but this is not fully implemented, as staff have not had the required training. The provision for First Aid is adequate, with a good proportion of staff being trained First Aiders and First Aid boxes available in appropriate places in the school. Although a sub-section of the health and safety policy relates to First Aid, there is not a separate policy giving more detailed guidance as required by the regulations.

Although the school has carried out an assessment of what it needs to do to make the school more accessible to people with disabilities, the current three-year plan is not sufficiently clearly set out with costings or timescales.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school meets most but not all of the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply fully with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- ensure that all staff, particularly the designated person, have training in child protection procedures, and that both training and the policy are updated regularly (paragraph 3(2)(b)); and*
- produce a policy for First Aid which sets out detailed guidance for staff (paragraph 3(6)).*

What does the school need to do to comply with the DDA?

In order to comply with the requirements of the DDA the school should:

- devise a detailed three-year plan to improve the accessibility of the premises.*

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

Staff qualifications and references confirming their employment history and suitability are checked before they take up post. Although Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and other appropriate checks have been carried out on current staff, this is not always done with sufficient rigour prior to the confirmation of appointments.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

No.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *ensure that CRB checks are begun as early as possible in the staff appointments procedure to minimise delay (paragraph 4(b)).*

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

The premises provide a satisfactory environment for teaching and learning. The exterior of the school is in a satisfactory condition and there are adequate outdoor facilities. The interior of the school is in a good state of decoration. Noise insulation and acoustics, lighting, heating and ventilation are generally good.

All classrooms are of sufficient size for the number of pupils. They are clean and tidy and many are enlivened by bright and attractive displays of pupils' work. Furniture and fittings in classrooms are in good condition with desks and chairs of the appropriate size for all pupils. There is a good range of indoor PE equipment. There are good facilities for the preparation of food. The hot food for lunch is safely carried to the dining area from the kitchen area, which is clean and well maintained.

Parental and pupil concerns about toilets have some substance. The current provision of washrooms and toilets is unsatisfactory. The school does not comply with the regulations because boys and girls are required to share three of the four toilet facilities. There are no paper towels or hot-air drying machines to dry hands after washing.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

No.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply in full with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *ensure that there are sufficient washrooms for staff and pupils, including facilities for pupils with special needs, which take account of the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 (paragraph 5(k)).*

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

The newly revised prospectus contains almost all the information required, although it does not yet specify policies to which parents and prospective parents can have access on request.

The quality of the reports to parents is good. All areas of the curriculum are covered, with specific judgements about the standards pupils reach, especially for older

pupils. Some parents would like more information about the curriculum so that they can help their children more at home, and would welcome further informal feedback about their children's progress between reports. Parents claim that some teachers are more approachable than others when they have questions or concerns. They particularly appreciate how well the headteacher knows their children.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school meets most but not all of the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply fully with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

make it clear to parents and prospective parents that the following information is available on request:

particulars of the curriculum offered by the school (paragraph 6(2)(g));

particulars of the policies relating to bullying, child protection, health and safety, the promotion of good behaviour, and sanctions adopted in the event of pupils misbehaving (paragraph 6(2)(h));

particulars of academic performance during the preceding school year, including the results of any public examinations (paragraph 6(2)(i)); and

details of the complaints procedure and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year (paragraph 6(2)(j)).

7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints

The school has a clear and comprehensive written complaints policy which sets out the procedures the school will follow in the management of any complaint.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of school:	St Joseph's Convent Preparatory School
DfES Number:	886/6041
Type of school:	Nursery and Primary
Status:	Independent
Age range of pupils:	3 - 11 years
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys: 103 Girls: 93 Total: 196
Number on roll (part-time pupils):	Boys: 5 Girls: 5 Total: 10
Annual fees (day pupils):	£3,900
Address of school:	46 Old Road East Gravesend Kent DA12 1NR
Telephone number:	01474 533012
Fax number:	01474 533012
Email address:	sisteranne@sjcps.org
Headteacher:	Sister Anne O'Connell
Proprietor:	Sisters of Mercy
Reporting Inspector:	Revd Ian Hartland
Date of inspection:	23 - 26 January 2006

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