



St Gerard's Roman Catholic Primary and Nursery School

Inspection Report

Better
education
and care

Unique Reference Number 111391
Local Authority Halton
Inspection number 288947
Inspection dates 1–2 November 2006
Reporting inspector Jon Lovgreen

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Primary	School address	Lugsdale Road
School category	Voluntary aided		Widnes
Age range of pupils	3–11		Cheshire WA8 6DD
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	0151 4242879
Number on roll (school)	171	Fax number	0151 4244461
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mr P Finney
		Headteacher	Mr Roger Harrison
Date of previous school inspection	8 July 2002		

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
3–11	1–2 November 2006	288947

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This smaller than average school is situated in the town centre. The area is impoverished, with many families facing hardship and problems. Almost half the pupils are eligible for free school meals. Most pupils come from a White British background. Numbers with learning difficulties are twice the national average and most children start school with weak basic skills. A high proportion of pupils join or leave the school other than at the normal times. The school has the Artsmark silver award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school with a number of outstanding aspects. It is rightly held in very high regard by parents and the local community, for which it is a focal point. Its strong but sensitive Christian ethos gives, and stimulates in return, the love and respect stated in its mission. A typical parental comment is: 'All the staff know and care deeply about the children, so that each child is made to feel special.' The quality of care, guidance and support is outstanding, helping pupils to flourish as individuals. This stems from the work of a dedicated staff, inspired by the enthusiastic leadership of the headteacher and senior management team. The school is honest, open and continually striving to improve. It is sharply self-aware: inspection findings mirror the school's own judgements. However, because lessons are not observed regularly there is no agreed view on which teaching styles and approaches are best for the pupils. Teaching is good, despite some limitations in marking. Importantly, pupils learn to be mature and conscientious. They grow in confidence and learn to get on well with others. Behaviour is excellent. The result is that pupils achieve well, often from low starting points. This begins with the good provision in the Foundation Stage which provides firm foundations for progress in later years. By the end of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 standards are close to the national average although extended writing remains a weakness and too few pupils gain the higher levels. The curriculum is good because topics help pupils see links across subject areas and the range of extra activities which pupils can take part in is superb. The school provides good value for money and has good capacity to bring about further improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Use marking to show pupils exactly which skills they need to improve and give clearer guidance as to how they can do this.
- Help pupils increase the speed, length and interest of their extended writing.
- Monitor how pupils learn in lessons so that the most effective techniques and strategies can be shared among all staff.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Standards are close to the national average and achievement is good. On entry many children have very limited language skills and vocabulary. Progress through the Foundation Stage is good, especially in physical and creative development, but few children reach national expectations by the beginning of Year 1. In Key Stage 1 pupils make good progress in reading and mathematics, and satisfactory progress with writing. Key Stage 1 test results, which showed a trend of decline, reflected this in 2005. This was reversed by much better results in 2006 - the result of a strong focus on literacy and numeracy skills. Boys and girls do equally well, but rarely gain the higher levels.

High levels of mobility affect achievement and results. In 2005 Year 6 results in the national tests were above average, representing outstanding progress, particularly in

mathematics and science where all pupils reached the level expected nationally. Unvalidated results for 2006 are not so good, but they show satisfactory progress, being skewed by the large number of pupils joining or leaving school in Years 3 to 6. The proportion of pupils reaching the higher grades fell. Pupils are confident using number and finding solutions to problems. They explain and explore ideas well in groups. Writing is neat, but creativity and working at length within time limits remain weaknesses. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress because their needs are identified and they get good support. Practical tasks and encouragement to talk ideas through also help them.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils describe how much they enjoy coming to school, one commenting for many that, 'It can get boring when you're not here.' Their attitudes and behaviour in classrooms and around the school are outstanding. They feel safe and secure and are confident enough to approach adults if they have any problems or difficulties. Attendance is in line with the national average for primary schools and punctuality is very good. Pupils take full advantage of the extensive range of opportunities provided for them to enhance their personal development. A good example of this is the way that older pupils take responsibility for the well-being of younger ones, for instance when they accompany them to mass at the church nearby. Pupils show respect to each other and to adults and express their opinions with increasing confidence in a very supportive environment. As a result, their independence and self-esteem are high and many display a far greater maturity than would be expected for their age. Pupils' excellent spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness provides a firm foundation for their development as learners and young people. It leads to the outstanding ethos evident throughout the school. This is demonstrated by the exemplary way in which pupils show care and consideration for one another around the school.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is good. Pupils know what is expected of them in their well managed classrooms. They behave impeccably, concentrate hard and persevere. As a result they are able to research and follow thorough ideas. Lessons are well planned to cater for the range of abilities, although tasks for the more able pupils are open-ended rather than planned to improve specific skills. Teachers use an excellent variety of methods. Group discussion is a strength. Pupils learn to think things through and to appreciate other ideas, as in a Year 6 numeracy lesson where pupils had to justify their choice of solutions to a range of problems. Pupils happily work in groups or on their own while other activities go on around them, giving the teacher the flexibility to spend time with particular groups. Whilst most speak

confidently, many pupils speak too quietly in whole-class discussion. Marking is regular and supportive. Advice is given and targets are set but these tend to be too general to give pupils precise things to concentrate on to improve their work. Teaching assistants make a valuable contribution to the support offered to those pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In less successful lessons pupils are less clear about the purpose of a task and the time they have to do it, so that learning is generalised and pace slows.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good. Its creative design, with an emphasis on the arts, provides a firm foundation for raising standards. Improving provision for literacy and information and communication technology provides pupils with effective basic skills for life. Imaginative use of teachers' interests has improved what pupils are offered in terms of design and technology. The curriculum supports the development of healthy lifestyles and a keen sense of community very well. Effective links with outside agencies extend the wealth of opportunities for enrichment outside the classroom. These enjoyable and exciting learning opportunities are well attended by pupils, whose physical, aesthetic and personal development benefit considerably as a result. Excellent educational visits, for example to Victoria Park in Year 2, and the Colomendy and Coniston residentials for juniors, broaden pupils' understanding of the world. The school council takes an active role in supporting and consulting pupils, including discussions about the much needed outdoor play area for Foundation Stage children.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

This aspect is outstanding. Very thorough procedures for child protection and assessing any risks ensure that all pupils are safeguarded. Very good attention is paid to promoting a healthy lifestyle, especially in terms of physical exercise. Teachers are aware of the needs of individual pupils and use this awareness to very good effect in the classroom. Pupils new to the school are offered sensitive help to settle quickly. In this safe, secure environment, pupils thrive. They care for each other exceptionally well. Peer mentoring and excellent behaviour ensure that playtimes are happy occasions in keeping with the Christian ethos of the school. Teachers assess pupils' work regularly and carefully, but pointers for improvement are often not specific. The school is highly responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable pupils, of whom there are many. Staff frequently meet with members of external agencies to plan the support required and review progress. Parents are regularly and fully informed about their children's progress.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The school thrives under the inspired leadership of the headteacher and senior management team. An atmosphere of openness, honesty, commitment and dedication,

shared by all staff, prevails. New ideas are welcomed, tried, and carefully evaluated. There is a good balance between levels of care and support for pupils, many of whom initially lack confidence and security, and expectations that staff and pupils will strive hard to achieve together. All who come to the school are welcomed, integrated and listened to. The three-year development plan has worked well. It has stimulated and enlivened an already successful school, providing a clear agenda for change and criteria to check progress. Priorities for development after it finishes in 2007 are not yet clear enough. Subject coordinators are now fully involved in planning and review. Planning and pupils' work are regularly scrutinised, but there is no regular and rigorous system to check the quality of lessons. Common strengths and weaknesses in teaching are not fully understood, and best practice is not always shared. The Foundation Stage is well managed, as seen in the way teachers work together to make sure that pupils can see the links in what they are learning.

The governing body is very effective. It is supportive and well informed by good quality information. Governors can thus ask searching questions while appreciating the quality of work done by the school staff. Financial management is good. There has been good improvement since the previous inspection because managers have worked hard to respond to its findings. The school has good capacity to improve further, not least because of the very good use it makes of new initiatives and outside expertise, including that of the local authority.

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Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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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
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1
The quality and standards in the Foundation Stage	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	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
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The behaviour of learners	1
The attendance of learners	3
How well learners enjoy their education	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
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 the learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

As you know, we recently visited your school to see how well you are doing, and whether the school is giving you the education you deserve. This letter is to tell you what we found.

First, thank you for being so friendly and welcoming. You really helped us by talking so honestly about your work and what you think of school. We agree with you that St Gerard's is a good school, and that many things about it are excellent. We were impressed and delighted by how mature and sensible you are, both in lessons and outside, and how thoughtful and caring you are of other people. This is because you appreciate and try to copy the excellent way all the adults in school help and care for you, so that you quickly feel settled, safe, loved and respected. You make good progress in lessons because you listen and concentrate and behave outstandingly well.. This in turn allows teachers to make lessons varied and interesting, and to spend time with those who need that extra little bit of help. Teachers work really hard, and like you, they benefit from the excellent and enthusiastic work of the headteacher and senior management team. You enjoy school so much because you get lots of chances to be creative, to take responsibility for things, and to join some of the huge range of clubs and activities on offer.

We have asked the teachers and governors to do three things to help your school become even better:

- explain to you in greater detail how to improve your work when they mark it or talk to you about it
- help you to write longer, more creative pieces of English at greater speed
- check lessons regularly to see exactly what helps you to learn best, so that all teachers can learn from this.

You can play your part by carrying on coming to school regularly and working hard, and by continuing to look after each other and respecting all that teachers and other school staff do for you.

Our very best wishes to you, and the school, for future happiness and success.