



Thorncombe, St Mary's Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 113767
Local Authority Dorset
Inspection number 289719
Inspection date 8 November 2006
Reporting inspector Geoff Burgess

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

Type of school	Primary	School address	Chard Street
School category	Voluntary controlled		Thorncombe
Age range of pupils	4-11		Chard TA20 4NE
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01460 30535
Number on roll (school)	69	Fax number	01460 30154
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Meg Terrett
		Headteacher	Tanya Foinette
Date of previous school inspection	17 September 2001		

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This is a small school serving a rural corner of West Dorset. All pupils are from White British backgrounds. Few are currently entitled to free school meals but the percentage of pupils identified by the school as having learning difficulties or disabilities is much higher than is usual. Movement of pupils into the school during the school year recently has been high and levels of absence have increased to above average. When children start school, their attainment is broadly average in most areas of learning. However, with small numbers involved, any one year can be above or below average.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

This is a satisfactory school with the ambition and capacity to build on the many recent improvements to the education and care it provides. A period of staffing disruption coinciding with an influx of pupils of all ages has provided the school with challenge and opportunity. With the new headteacher in the lead, the school has used the opportunity to identify and resolve some of the difficulties and set in motion actions to sort out the rest. All members of the school community are very happy with the new arrangements and are clear about their role. Teachers feel there is 'a buzz about the place' and parents are very happy with the education their children are receiving. However, many of the changes need more time to come to fruition, especially in raising standards. The solid foundations set mean that leadership and management are now satisfactory.

One consequence of the difficulties in the school was that progress in the older class slowed significantly, especially in mathematics and science, and standards fell. Achievement improved to satisfactory in the last academic year and it is satisfactory again this year. Solid achievement in the Foundation Stage and Years 1 and 2 has been sustained throughout the whole period. However, observations in the school show that achievement among older pupils is now good. Standards are broadly average but, with small numbers involved, they are prone to change year on year. For instance, standards in Year 3 are below average because several pupils have learning difficulties. However, the school knows that raising standards in mathematics and science remains a priority.

The overall quality of teaching is satisfactory. There are real strengths in Years 5 and 6 this term, but expectations are not consistently high throughout the school and some teaching is not as focused and challenging. One problem, which the school has started to deal with, is the quality of the procedures by which pupils' progress is measured and tracked. Records exist but they are difficult to interpret and verify, or to use to set targets or inform teaching.

The school has done a great deal to enhance pupils' personal development, which is now good. Their well-being is particularly well catered for. Pupils know the importance of staying fit and eating healthily and the pastoral care and support provided by staff is a real strength of the school. A parent described St Mary's as 'a large family looking out for each other'. Pupils feel safe and happy in school and know that they can always go to a member of staff for help. However, weaknesses in the way pupils' progress is tracked mean that the quality of academic guidance is not as strong and this makes overall care, guidance and support satisfactory. The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory, with real strengths in the extra activities provided by the school which are much appreciated by parents and pupils. However, the mathematics and science curricula do not fully meet the needs of all pupils and activities for the youngest children are hampered by a lack of space in their shared classroom.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve standards in mathematics and science by developing the curriculum in both subjects so that it better meets the needs and interests of all pupils in the mixed age classes.
- Improve teaching by raising the levels of focus and challenge in all lessons to match those seen in the best.
- Develop a manageable system for tracking the progress of pupils against national standards and use this information to set targets and evaluate and modify teaching.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

In common with other small schools, standards are much affected by the balance of abilities in the small group of pupils in each year group. This is reflected in the Foundation Stage where almost all of the current group are expected to achieve the early learning goals while in other years, several have not. Standards in English as shown by Year 6 national tests have usually been above average. In mathematics, results have ranged from well above average to well below in 2005, though they are usually above. In science they have usually been below average. Standards in reading and writing have also been better than mathematics in Year 2. School records and pupils' current work indicate that standards are now broadly average but still reflect the subject differences noted above.

As measured by national tests, achievement over the longer term has been satisfactory, with English stronger and science weaker. It is currently satisfactory. Lower-attaining pupils and those with learning difficulties or disabilities usually make sound progress. The influx of new pupils has altered the balance of abilities within year groups but good induction arrangements have meant that most have achieved as well as the rest of pupils in their class.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils enjoy school, describing their time there as 'fun', and particularly appreciate the wide range of extra activities they are encouraged to take part in. Small numbers mean that pupils know one another well and show respect for each other and for the adults who help them. They understand the benefits to be gained from a healthy lifestyle and say their newly introduced school dinners 'make us healthier'. Pupils feel safe at school, say that bullying is rare, and that the headteacher 'would sort it out' if it happened. Their involvement in the community is good. School councillors are proud that they 'decide things that need to be sorted out', for example improvements to the playground. Pupils are proud that their school is 'eco-friendly' and take an active interest in caring for the environment. Attendance is satisfactory. Levels have been poor, mainly due to the prolonged absence through illness of a small number of

pupils. However, recent levels are above average and the school monitors attendance closely.

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. The school recognises that multi-cultural development is a weaker aspect and has already begun to do more to promote pupils' understanding of different cultures.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The main consequence of the staffing disruption mentioned earlier was that teaching in the oldest class suffered. New appointments and changes of class have resolved this issue and high quality teaching in Years 5 and 6 is seeing older pupils achieving much better than they have done for some time. Sound, effective teaching in the youngest class provided stability right through the changes and the appointment of a new teacher to the middle class has provided energy and a new perspective, especially in the area of ICT. However, not all lessons have the necessary focus and challenge, and current assessment procedures do not provide the level of detail necessary to fine tune teaching to meet pupils' needs.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Pupils talk enthusiastically about the many varied extra-curricular activities. Provision for sports and physical education is a strength of the school. One parent particularly appreciated that the school 'had found talents that we were unaware of'. A very good range of local visits and visitors such as the chef from the Academy of Culinary Arts contribute greatly to pupils' enjoyment of their work. English, mathematics and science are given due importance but in science especially, and to a lesser extent mathematics, the curriculum does not fully meet the needs of pupils in the mixed age classes. The school has recently invested in new computer hardware and is developing teachers' skills to ensure that the use of modern technology is a more regular feature of learning. The Foundation Stage curriculum is satisfactory, but space for a role-play area is limited, and the outdoor area lacks equipment to promote physical activities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

The school is a safe and harmonious community where parents feel their children are well cared for. Because teachers know pupils well, they are able to keep a close watch on their individual needs and development, and provide help where and when it is needed. Pupils settle in quickly when they join the school. One who had recently come to Thorncombe said that 'everyone was really kind to me and made me feel welcome'. Close attention is given to safeguarding and protecting pupils. All procedures are in place and known to all staff. However, the process of evaluating progress and of setting

and reviewing individual learning targets throughout the school is still being developed. Pupils receive some limited guidance and advice towards achieving their targets but many do not yet have a clear idea of how to make progress in their learning.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Outcomes show that leadership and management of the school are satisfactory. However, this does not fully reflect the very good job the new headteacher has done in managing the school through a difficult period and in raising morale and developing a team ethic to move the school forward. Her analysis of the school's strengths and weaknesses has proven to be both perceptive and accurate and the resulting actions already taken have put strong foundations in place on which to build achievement. A good indication of the positive impact this has had has been the way that so many parents from outside the school's catchment have chosen to move their children to the school. The governing body have always been very supportive but they are now much more aware of their role as 'critical friends' of the school. However, much still needs to be done to improve monitoring and to further develop the contribution made by staff and governors to the leadership and management of their areas of responsibility.

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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?	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	3
The quality and standards in the Foundation Stage	3
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?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The behaviour of learners	2
The attendance of learners	3
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3

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?	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
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

Thank you for making our day at your school so enjoyable. We know you are really pleased with your new school dinners but it was a little confusing to see so many chefs of all sizes around the school! Both of us were really impressed by how well you all get on together and how all the people who have joined the school recently have fitted in so well. It is easy to see you really enjoy your time in school. We think your school is satisfactory right now but getting better all the time.

This is what we liked most about your school:

- everybody gets on really well together
- your behaviour is good and you try hard
- it is good to see that your school is eco-friendly and that the work you do through the school council has improved your school environment
- your teachers and helpers arrange lots of extra activities for you during and outside lessons
- all the adults in the school know you and look after you really well, and make sure you are safe and healthy
- your headteacher and all the other teachers and helpers are working hard to make sure your time in school is happy and positive.

To make things even better, this is what we have asked your school to do now:

- find ways to make what you learn in maths and science more interesting for you
- try to make all lessons as good as the best – you can help your teachers in this by making sure time isn't wasted and by contributing your ideas and suggestions
- make it possible for both you and your teacher to know exactly how well you are doing and what you need to do to improve.