

St John's Catholic Primary School, Gravesend

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118755
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	291243
Inspection date	6 June 2007
Reporting inspector	Carole Skinner

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	698
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Dillon-Leetch
Headteacher	Ann-Marie Ratcliffe
Date of previous school inspection	18 March 2002
School address	Rochester Road Gravesend DA12 2SY
Telephone number	01474 534546
Fax number	01474 536112

Age group	3–11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

This very large primary school draws its pupils from a wide variety of social and ethnic backgrounds. It has broadly average proportions of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities and pupils who speak English as an additional language. The school has a 100-place part-time Nursery. On entry to the Nursery, attainment is well below expectation for the age of the pupils, as many have weak language, communication and social skills. Since the last inspection there has been a complete change of leadership team and a very high turnover of teachers.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This outstanding school promotes excellence in all aspects of the pupils' education. Reflecting the views of many, one parent wrote, 'I can't praise the school highly enough. In my opinion it is outstanding in all aspects'. The school is successful because it places high value on pupils' academic achievement and their personal development and well-being, both of which are outstanding. Pupils achieve standards that are well above the national average in English, mathematics and science. But St John's is about much more than performing well in national tests. Its exceptionally good teaching and curriculum extend across a whole range of subjects and additional activities. Music is a particular area of excellence as was demonstrated in an uplifting rehearsal of Year 4's 'Tour de France' opera. The school's participation in a local writing project and the School Sports Partnership testify to its commitment to improving all aspects of pupils' learning.

Pupils enjoy school immensely and are clearly proud of their achievements. They say teachers make learning fun but they also know that they are expected to work hard. Pupils feel safe and well cared for because of the excellent care, guidance and support that are provided by all adults. The school's strong Catholic ethos shines through in its calm and welcoming atmosphere and in the exemplary behaviour of the pupils. Mutual respect, courtesy and consideration for others are evident at every turn. The school celebrates cultural diversity, nowhere more evident than when staff and pupils joined together to experience and enjoy the festival of Divali.

One of the main reasons why pupils make such good progress is that they get off to an excellent start in the Nursery and Reception classes. Here, children are greeted every day with an exciting variety of very well planned activities that help them to grow in confidence and develop a wide range of basic skills. From this point onwards and throughout the school, teachers assess every pupil's progress meticulously. This enables them to plan work that matches each pupil's needs and builds on their previous learning. Pupils with learning difficulties and those who are learning to speak English as an additional language are given exceptionally good support and make excellent progress. This is not a school that rests on its laurels. Its outstanding leadership is forward thinking, dynamic and innovative. Leaders are very self-critical and conservative in their own judgements of the school's performance. One of their greatest strengths is the way they nurture and support newly qualified teachers and develop leadership skills amongst all staff. Excellent teamwork is a key feature of the school's management and its success. All of these qualities have enabled the school to maintain high standards during a recent period of unusually high staff turnover. They also ensure that the school is very well placed to continue to improve in the years ahead.

What the school should do to improve further

The school has no significant weaknesses and has an excellent capacity to improve on its current high standards by implementing the priorities already identified in its strategic plan.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Although standards remain just below average by the end of the Foundation Stage, the excellent foundations that have been laid in the Nursery and Reception classes ensure that pupils are ready to take off in their learning when they move into Year 1, and that is exactly what happens. Skilful teaching, founded on high expectations of every pupil, builds on those early foundations

outstandingly well. By the end of Years 2 and 6, standards are well above national averages, and in some years exceptionally high. Pupils do particularly well in English throughout the school. There has been slightly more variation in mathematics and science in Years 3 to 6 but prompt action by the school has successfully raised standards to well above average levels in those subjects too. This outstanding achievement extends to other areas of the curriculum. High standards are evident in the colourful and well finished artwork displayed around the school and in the school's high quality musical performances and successes in a local music festival.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils develop outstanding personal qualities and social skills that prepare them exceptionally well for the next stage of their education and their future life as citizens in a multicultural society. They show tolerance, consideration and respect for each other and for adults. Their excellent spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is founded on a successful mix of Christian principles and genuine appreciation of ethnic and religious diversity. Pupils thrive on being given responsibility and respond with enthusiasm to everything the school offers, not least the excellent variety of extra-curricular activities. They develop important team building skills on visits to a local outdoor pursuits centre and participate in the democratic process of electing school councillors as their spokespersons. Pupils enjoy school immensely and contribute much to its success by taking a pride in all they do. One pupil spoke with enthusiasm about his efforts to get a newspaper off the ground, others about their sterling work in raising funds for their chosen charities or their role as sports leaders. Pupils have a growing awareness of how to keep fit and healthy and many participate in additional sporting activities at lunchtime and after school. The new, improved school dinners provide those who choose them with a healthy meal, but it is taking a little longer to convince some pupils to bring similarly nutritious packed lunches.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

'All the teachers are enthusiastic all the time.' So said one pupil, and many others agreed that this is an important reason why they enjoy school so much. To put it simply, teachers make learning fun while ensuring that pupils work hard and acquire the skills and knowledge that will equip them well to face future challenges. Every classroom provides a bright and vibrant learning environment. Teachers expect a lot of their pupils and set appropriately challenging work for them. Lessons are pacy and energetic, moving learning along briskly. Imaginative use of interactive technology captures pupils' interest and presents information in a visual format that enables many to understand new ideas more easily. Others benefit from the many opportunities to learn through practical activities. Rigorous and frequent assessments inform teachers' planning and ensure that pupils' needs are met well. Pupils with learning difficulties and those learning English for the first time receive high quality support from skilled teaching assistants and so they make excellent progress.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The rich and varied curriculum contributes significantly to pupils' enjoyment and achievement. A first-rate range of activities provides children in the Nursery and Reception classes with excellent opportunities to develop their language, communication, numeracy and social skills. Throughout the school the curriculum is constantly evolving in response to national and local initiatives as teachers seek ways to make increasingly effective links between subjects. An outstanding range of enrichments extends opportunities for pupils to participate in sports, drama, dance, singing and instrumental lessons. Special events such as the 'Safety in Action' activities for Year 6 show them how to deal with potentially dangerous situations in their lives beyond school. Valuable links with the neighbouring comprehensive school and membership of the School Sports Partnership further enhance the pupils' learning.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

One parent accurately described the school as 'very supportive and caring'. It is a place where pupils are valued and nurtured. The school actively fosters tolerance and mutual respect between pupils. Adults provide excellent care for all pupils. Their encouraging and supportive manner helps pupils to form meaningful and trusting relationships. One pupil commented 'If you have a problem you can talk to a member of staff and they will sort it out'. There are excellent procedures for safeguarding pupils and promoting their well-being. The school works very closely with parents and external agencies to support pupils' personal development and their academic progress. Rigorous systems for tracking individual pupils' progress ensure that teachers take prompt action to tackle the first signs that a pupil may not be making the progress expected.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Outstanding teamwork under the excellent leadership of the headteacher is a key ingredient in the school's recipe for success. Leaders and managers at all levels hold themselves accountable for maintaining high standards in all aspects of the school's work. Exceptionally thorough analysis of assessment data keeps staff and governors focused on key priorities for improvement. Rigorous and robust self-evaluation involves all staff and governors in identifying the strengths and shortcomings of the school's performance. Subject leaders drive improvements and monitor the quality of provision and the standards achieved by the pupils. The school has an outstanding track record in supporting staff through first-rate professional development. All staff are encouraged to view themselves as leaders of learning and all share the same vision and values, placing pupils' academic and personal development firmly at the heart of all they do. Governors carry out rigorous checks on the school's performance and make very effective use of their considerable expertise to support staff in their efforts to sustain high standards.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

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

Achievement and standards

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

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	2
How well learners enjoy their education	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
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	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
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	1
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	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
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

7 June 2007

Dear Pupils,

Inspection of St John's Catholic Primary School, Gravesend DA12 2SY

I very much enjoyed my recent visit to your school and I would like to thank you all for your very warm welcome. I really enjoyed talking to some of you and sitting in on a few lessons. I was very pleased that I was able to watch a little of Year 4's opera rehearsal. What talented musicians and singers you are! You all achieve high standards and make exceptionally good progress at St John's because it is an outstanding school. Your excellent behaviour in assembly, in lessons and at lunchtime is a credit to you. You are very courteous and considerate and take your responsibilities seriously. The school gives you excellent support and all the adults care for you very well. They help you to become more confident and independent and prepare you extremely well for your future lives.

Many of you told me that your lessons are fun and that the teachers make them enjoyable for you, but you also said that they expect you to work very hard. The excellent teaching and curriculum are two of the main reasons why you make such good progress. The school gives you many exciting opportunities to learn about different things. The Year 6 'Safety in Action' activities sounded really interesting, and important for helping you to keep safe. The school is doing lots of things to help you keep fit and healthy, and many of you told me how good the school dinners are. A lot of you are very good at bringing healthy snacks and lunches, but it would be great if you could all remember to bring fresh fruit or vegetables as part of your lunch. I am pleased that so many of you take part in the lunchtime and after school clubs. I was absolutely amazed at the speed-stackers! How on earth do you do it so quickly? By the end of the day, I could understand why you all enjoy school so much.

You learn how to work together well as a team as you move through the school, and this is a very important skill. The adults who run your school are excellent at it. Mrs Ratcliffe, the staff and governors make a fantastic team because they all work together to give you the best possible education they can. They never stop looking for ways to improve the school and they are very good at spotting when things are not going as well as they should. They know exactly what needs to be improved and have very clear plans to show what they are going to do over the next few years. I am sure you will help them by continuing to work hard and taking a pride in your school.

With very best wishes,

Carole Skinner Lead inspector