

St Thomas' Church of England VA Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	103419
Local Authority	Birmingham
Inspection number	308313
Inspection dates	13–14 May 2008
Reporting inspector	Chris Kessell

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	171
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Phillip Bellamy
Headteacher	Keith Fisher
Date of previous school inspection	9 February 2004
School address	Great Colmore Street Birmingham B15 2AT
Telephone number	0121 6222151
Fax number	0121 6224121

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

St Thomas' is smaller than most other primary schools and is situated in Birmingham city centre in an area of urban regeneration. A significant fall in the school roll and high staff turnover led to an uncertain future for the school. Pupil numbers are now on the increase and the Nursery, Reception and Year 1 classes are oversubscribed for next year. Class numbers in Years 3 to 6 are still small.

The majority of pupils come from Black or Black British Caribbean backgrounds. More than ten other ethnic heritages are represented in the school. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average. A few pupils are at an early stage of learning English.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

This friendly and welcoming school provides a satisfactory education for its pupils. It is popular with parents, who appreciate its Christian ethos. The school has been through a difficult period, which led to pupils underachieving and low standards. Thanks to the efforts of the staff and good support provided by the local authority, the school is now steadily improving.

Pupils' achievement is satisfactory overall. Children get an effective start in the Foundation Stage and make good progress. After a number of years of very low standards in Year 2, there has been significant improvement recently as a result of effective teaching. The school has done particularly well in closing the gap between reading and writing standards through strategies such as 'Big Writing'. However, boys still tend to do less well than girls. Standards in Year 6 in English and mathematics are exceptionally low. The older pupils are still suffering from a legacy of underachievement in the past, although their achievement is now satisfactory.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. There is good teaching in the Foundation Stage and in Years 1 and 2. However, there is still insufficient good teaching in Years 3 to 6 to ensure that pupils in these year groups make the rapid progress necessary to catch up on previous underachievement. There are times when teachers do not have high enough expectations of their pupils and the pace of lessons is not quick enough. The advice offered to pupils through teachers' marking varies significantly in quality, as does the use of pupils' targets for learning. At present, neither marking nor target setting is having a significant impact on improving pupils' achievement.

Good pastoral care helps pupils to become sensible and enthusiastic learners. Teachers have good relationships with their pupils and know their circumstances well. As one parent stated, 'When I take my children to school, I know they are in good hands.' Pupils show their enjoyment of school by attending regularly and behaving well. Pupils from different ethnic backgrounds work and play together harmoniously. Although the pupils' basic skills are well below average, their good personal development equips them satisfactorily for their next school and later life. The satisfactory curriculum provides a good range of additional activities for a school of this size. The popular Bible club reflects the school's religious nature and effectively supports the pupils' spiritual development. Music provision has much improved and it was a pleasure to listen to the school choir during the inspection.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. There are a number of new leaders and managers, who are working hard to improve standards and the quality of provision. The headteacher, who is leaving at the end of the current term, has managed the changes at the school well and has brought about improvements in the quality of provision such as before-and after-school care. The headteacher-designate works in the school for one day a week. This innovative practice is enabling a smooth period of transition and the incoming headteacher's involvement in strategic development. Recent improvements in standards, such as those in Year 2, indicate that the school has a satisfactory capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

The Foundation Stage provides a good start for the children. Children enter the school with low-level social and learning skills. They make good progress as a result of good teaching, although by the time they enter Year 1, the majority have not achieved average standards.

Despite this, children do particularly well in developing their communication, language, literacy and social skills. There is a happy, purposeful atmosphere in lessons and children develop confidence and good independence. They enjoy the activities provided for them both in the classroom and outside. The attractive, safe environment encourages them to learn and they work hard. There are good relationships with the adults who support them. Parents are encouraged to become involved, particularly with how they can support their child's learning at home. The Foundation Stage is well led and managed. There is comprehensive monitoring of children's progress. This information is used effectively so that children are provided with appropriately planned activities so that they can achieve well. Staff have high expectations and are working hard to develop provision even further, so that an even larger proportion of children reach average levels at the end of the Foundation Stage.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve pupils' achievement and raise standards in English and mathematics, particularly in Years 3 to 6 and in boys' writing.
- Improve the quality of teaching, especially in Years 3 to 6, by ensuring that all teachers have high expectations of what the pupils can achieve and set a good pace to lessons.
- Ensure that pupils are given individual learning targets in English and mathematics and are also provided with good guidance on how to achieve these targets and improve their work.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged as satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Pupils' achievement is satisfactory and improving and standards are rising. However, there is still some way to go, particularly for the older pupils, who have been most affected by the school's recent history. Children in the Foundation Stage and Years 1 and 2 are now making good progress. Although standards are currently below average in Year 2, this is a significant improvement on the national tests and assessments in previous years.

Although progress is now better in Years 3 to 6, many of these pupils did not benefit from the good start now available in the younger years. Consequently, standards in Year 6 are still exceptionally low, although there is an improvement on standards in the national tests in 2007. Additional help and support for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities enable them to make at least satisfactory progress. When their provision is well organised, as it is in good lessons, their progress is often good. Standards in writing are rising, especially in Years 1 and 2. However, boys do not do as well as girls. Pupils at an early stage of learning English settle into school well and develop their language skills but, as with other pupils, their progress is largely dependent on the quality of teaching they receive.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils are friendly and welcoming and happily talk to visitors about their work and other activities in which they take part. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Strong links with the local church support spiritual development well and pupils have great respect for cultural differences. They take good care of each other. Pupils thoroughly

enjoy attending and attendance rates have improved significantly over the last few years so that they are now above average. Pupils' behaviour is good most of the time, although a few pupils are receiving support to improve their behaviour. Members of staff manage these pupils well, so that they rarely disturb the learning of others. Pupils are keen to take responsibility and this helps them to make a good contribution to the community. School councillors are pleased with the way they have helped to improve facilities at break times, and pupils talk very positively about the Friendship Stop and role of the playground buddies. Pupils have a good awareness of how to stay safe and healthy. They play together happily, for example, using play equipment and climbing apparatus sensibly, and they keenly participate in physical activities such as the 'Wake and Shake' that starts each school day.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The quality of teaching has been steadily improving and this has contributed to recent improvements in standards and pupils' achievement, especially in Years 1 and 2. Throughout the school, teachers form good relationships with pupils. Although there are good features to teaching in all year groups, such as the use of interactive whiteboards, there are still too many lessons in Years 3 to 6 where teachers' expectations are not high enough and the pace of lessons is leisurely. Equally, work is not always pitched at the right levels for all pupils, and this slows progress. Pupils made good progress in a Year 1 numeracy lesson because the teacher had high expectations of all her pupils, no matter what their ability. The pace of the lesson was good and this was reflected in pupils' enthusiasm to learn. Teachers' marking is inconsistent. Too often, pupils are not provided with enough information on how to improve their work or move to the next stages of learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

In some year groups, the extensive focus on improving pupils' literacy and numeracy skills has led to a limited coverage of other subjects, such as geography and history. The school is aware of this situation and is currently reviewing the curriculum to ensure that all subjects are provided with sufficient time and more is made of the natural links between subjects to make learning purposeful. The school provides a good variety of curricular enrichment. Pupils are offered a diverse range of after-school clubs that support aspects of their personal and social development. They enjoy visits out and visitors to school that successfully enhance their learning. Pupils have an opportunity to experience a residential visit and enjoy the use of the school swimming pool as part of their physical activity.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

All members of staff look after pupils well and give them good pastoral support. This enables pupils to feel safe and secure and able to develop good personal skills. Pupils speak candidly about how well looked after they are and that there is always an adult to turn to if they have a problem. The school works very closely with outside agencies and other groups to safeguard pupils. Academic guidance and support have a more limited impact. Tracking systems are in place to check pupils' progress, especially in English and mathematics, but not all staff use this

information as effectively as they could. Pupils have individual learning targets, but their quality and use varies significantly across the school, so their impact on pupils' learning is limited.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

There is a clear determination amongst the staff to do the best for the pupils and improve the quality of provision. Staff work together well and have an accurate understanding of what needs to improve. Recent developments are starting to improve pupils' progress. The work and support of the LA have also played an important role in school improvement. There are good links with parents, who hold the school in high regard. The high turnover of staff means that a number of senior and middle managers are still developing their roles and have not yet had a significant impact within their responsibilities, although they are moving in the right direction. Governors have become far more proactive in holding the school to account for the standards that pupils achieve. They have high expectations and are determined that the school should continue to improve. However, they are still insufficiently involved in school self-evaluation.

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Annex A

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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
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 extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	2
The behaviour of learners	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.

Annex A

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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	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

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

15 May 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Thomas' C of E VA Primary School, Birmingham B15 2AT

Thank you for being so friendly and welcoming when we came and visited your school recently. We enjoyed your 'Wake up and Shake up' start to the school day and the way in which the choir sang 'What should we do with the drunken sailor?' This letter is to let you know what we found out about your school.

St Thomas' provides you with a satisfactory education. Children get off to a good start in the Nursery and Reception classes. This continues into Years 1 and 2, where standards of work are improving quite quickly. You make satisfactory progress in Years 3 to 6 but standards are not as high as they should be, so we have asked the headteacher, staff and governors to help you improve your work, especially writing and the boys' work in this part of the curriculum.

You behave well and know how to stay healthy. With so many of you enjoying school and all of the activities that you are offered, attendance levels are good and much better than those found in most other schools. You are lucky to have a swimming pool and so many other things to do which help keep you fit and healthy. It was exhausting just watching some of you on the climbing apparatus!.

We would like to see more teaching in the school that helps you make good progress so we have asked the headteacher, staff and governors to look at this as well. The adults care for you well so that you feel safe and happy at school. They help you with your work but we would like the school to give you more information on how to improve your work and reach your individual targets.

The headteacher, staff and governors are all working hard to make the school even better. You can help them by working hard all of the time, especially with your writing.

We thoroughly enjoyed talking to you about your work and watching you learn. We are glad that you enjoy coming to this friendly school and wish you well for the future.

Yours sincerely

Chris Kessell Lead inspector