

St Thomas More Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	114275
Local Authority	Durham
Inspection number	311544
Inspection date	27 September 2007
Reporting inspector	Sonja Oyen HMI

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	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	115
School	
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Reilly O'Donnell
Headteacher	Mrs Lesley Anne Wright
Date of previous school inspection	1 February 2004
School address	Thorndale Road Belmont Durham County Durham DH1 2AQ
Telephone number	0191 3864761
Fax number	0191 3847025

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). The school was visited for one day. HMI evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: achievement in writing and mathematics, the quality of teaching and learning, and the effectiveness of the governors and senior managers in moving the school on. This was done by gathering evidence from observing lessons, scrutinising school documentation and questionnaires completed by parents, and by talking with pupils, parents, governors, staff and headteacher.

Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but HMI found evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given its self-evaluation, were justified. In one aspect, pupils' personal development, the school had been too modest. The evidence has been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

This popular school in Belmont, a residential area a few miles east of Durham city, is smaller than average. Although most of the 114 pupils live close by, a significant number travel some distance. Not all pupils are from Catholic families. The vast majority of pupils are of White British heritage and very few have English as an additional language. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals is low. A smaller proportion than average of pupils are identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities and no pupil has a statement of special educational need. On entry to the Reception year, many pupils have attended local play groups and nurseries. Pupils' skills and knowledge are generally as expected, or better, for their age.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Thomas More is a good school. It has some outstanding features, notably the provision for the youngest and oldest pupils and the way it builds on pupils' positive attitudes so that they achieve very well personally and academically. The staff have high expectations of the pupils who rise to the challenge. Pupils get off to a flying start in the Reception year and by the end of Years 2 and 6, standards are well above the national average. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities often reach the standard expected for their age because of encouraging support from adults and other pupils. Year 6 pupils are extremely well prepared for secondary school; their skills in reading, writing, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) are more typical of pupils a year or two older. In addition, they are well rounded, considerate, reflective individuals. This is because of strong, purposeful teaching and a wealth of opportunities for pupils to take responsibility for their own learning. A good example was the Tudor day when pupils raised funds for a hospice through making and selling goods, and presented plays to pupils from a partner school.

Pupils, staff and governors are justifiably proud of their school; parents value highly the strong Christian ethos and the care and support that come from being 'a small school family'. Younger pupils showed respect for older pupils in their role as prefects. All behaved well in and out of class although some younger juniors were restless towards the end of the day. School councillors were pleased that their requests had resulted in newly painted toilets and had several ideas about how best to use the profits from their Healthy Tuck Shop. Comments such as 'I could stay here all the time', 'I enjoy everything' and 'It's wonderful when you are star of the week' typified pupils' views and partly explain good attendance rates. Reception year pupils' confidence, friendliness and openness were echoed throughout the school. In lessons, pupils were quick to learn and keen to use what they knew. As a result, pupils' work is frequently of a good standard in content and presentation. The school is awash with eye catching examples of pupils' work in different subjects.

The pupils do well because the quality of teaching and the curriculum are good. In English, for example, pupils are taught thoroughly the basic skills in reading and writing. Teachers' good subject knowledge and skilful questioning ensure pupils develop an enthusiasm for reading which, along with their easy facility with language, spills over into writing. In all year groups, pupils show flair in the imaginative use of words and phrases. A true asset is the early development of neat, joined handwriting as well as accuracy in spelling and use of punctuation. In mathematics, pupils' achievement is more variable. The school's analysis of performance last year indicates that some pupils lack confidence in solving problems. Pupils' work and responses in lessons suggested that their knowledge of mathematical procedures is not always matched by a secure understanding of place value and the relationship between numbers. As pupils rarely include workings out in their books, it is difficult for the staff to identify precisely where misconceptions may lie. As a result, teachers' marking is not as helpful as it is in English in giving the pupils clear indications of how to improve.

The staff form a strong team, committed to giving the pupils the best. The sharing of expertise and ideas, such as using a topic to link subjects, is benefiting teachers new to the school and starting to develop a common richness of experience in all classes. Senior managers are working with staff to iron out fully inconsistencies in the teaching which led to the underachievement of some pupils in the last school year.

The governors and staff are not complacent. The headteacher gives a strong lead with a clear focus on improving the provision. Pupils' and parents' views are regularly sought and acted on where possible. Parents are kept informed of school events and their children's progress but receive limited information on the current focus for learning and how they might help their children to meet their targets. Governance is strong; governors have a broadly accurate picture of the school's performance and where improvements and refinements are possible. They are right in judging the school to give good value for money. The school improvement plan gives a general overview of key areas that will make a difference. However, it does not specify well enough the areas for attention. This is partly because the school has not made the most of the data it has on the pupils' performance to identify weaker elements and the factors that may account for them. Consequently it can not be sure that it has set truly challenging targets. Class teachers track their pupils' progress well. In English, thorough tracking and the identification of what pupils need to learn are strengths of the teaching, especially for pupils in Year 2. The recent reallocation of responsibilities, the restructuring of the assessment systems and the proposals to realign governors' monitoring are set to strengthen the school's good capacity to improve.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 1

The pupils in the Reception year enjoy an outstanding range of exciting, well planned experiences in all six areas of learning both inside and outside the vibrant classroom. Boys and girls make rapid progress because the adults guide them into acquiring new knowledge and skills, and give them time to practise and refine what they can do. Every day is different with a gradual increase in challenge, often to that expected of much older pupils. The teacher knows exactly what each pupil needs to learn next and is quick to recognise and celebrate when a pupil has done something for the first time. Pupils are encouraged and expected to think for themselves; they thrive as a consequence and by the end of the year are reading, writing and solving number problems with confidence.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure greater consistency in the marking of pupils' work especially in identifying for pupils what they need to do to improve.
- Provide parents with more information on what their children are learning and how they may best support them in meeting their targets.
- Refine the analysis of data from pupils' performance to identify precise areas for improvement.

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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?	2
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	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

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

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?	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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2
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

28th September 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Thomas More Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary, Durham, DH1 2AQ

Thank you for your warm welcome when I visited the school to see how well you are learning. A big thank you again to Katy and Ryan for their guided tour and for telling me about life at St Thomas More! It was good to see all your work on display, to meet class 1's guinea pigs and to hear about new ventures - class 4's animation of the brief history of Durham was quite a triumph.

I agree that yours is a good school and can understand why you enjoy it so much. Certainly a lot seems to go on during a school year and you get to do some interesting things. In lessons, you were often absorbed in activities but also so willing to tell me about them. Your good manners do you credit.

Here are some of the things that make your school so good.

- The way that you all work hard to meet your targets. Many of you are doing well for your age because your teachers know what to do to get the best out of you. Mrs Wright wants you to excel.
- Your willingness to take part, your friendliness and concern for others.
- All the exciting things that class 1 get up to: the children do really well, especially in reading, writing and number.
- The very good quality of work in class 4: pupils in Years 5 and 6 do so well because their teacher pushes them on. Katy was right when she said that enthusiasm helps in a teacher, and in those being taught!

I have asked the governors, Mrs Wright and all the staff to do the following things to help the school be even better.

- When they mark your work to tell you exactly what you need to do to make it better next time. You can help by telling them when you do not understand.
- To give your parents more details of what you are learning and how they can help you to meet your targets. Perhaps you have some ideas of how to do this?
- To be even more clever and identify exactly where some/many of you have not done so well so that they can take steps to help you. Which bits in English, mathematics and science are not as good as you want them to be?

Keep up the good learning!

Sonja Oyen HMI

(Lead inspector/HMI)