

St Thomas More Catholic Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115263
Local Authority	ESSEX LA
Inspection number	311892
Inspection date	28 February 2008
Reporting inspector	Colin Henderson

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	206
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr K McLoughlin
Headteacher	Mrs M J Hall
Date of previous school inspection	15 September 2003
School address	South Road Saffron Walden Essex CB11 3DW
Telephone number	01799523248
Fax number	01799525800

Age group	4-11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector. The inspector evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: current achievement, the quality of teaching and learning, challenge to the most able and gifted and talented pupils, achievement in the Foundation Stage and pupils' personal development. Evidence was gathered from observations of lessons, analysis of pupils' work, discussion with them, the staff and the chair of governors, and a scrutiny of school documents and parents' questionnaires. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail but the school's own judgements have been included in the report where appropriate.

Description of the school

Children come from the local town and a wide surrounding area. They are from generally favourable home backgrounds. The number eligible for free school meals is below average. Broadly average numbers have learning difficulties or disabilities. The number with statements of educational need is just above the national average. The attainment of children starting in Reception year is just above that expected for their age. The school is part of a Federation of eleven local schools.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is an outstanding school where pupils receive an excellent education. It is valued highly by pupils and their parents and reflected in their many very positive comments, such as 'a really first-rate school in every way!' The very caring, Catholic ethos provides a strong spiritual, social and moral grounding. As a result, pupils' personal development and well-being are outstanding. Relationships are excellent. Everybody looks out for each other to ensure that they are happy and enjoying school. Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. They are keen to meet the staff's high expectations and gain recognition, for example, by achieving house points. Pupils have enthusiastic attitudes and clearly enjoy school, as shown by high levels of attendance, that have improved considerably since the last inspection.

Pupils' achievement is excellent. It results from outstanding teaching, pupils' desire to learn, the consistently high quality of individual support and guidance and the determined and rigorous approach of the headteacher and staff to maintain high performance. Standards are consistently well above the national average, as reflected in the national test results in Years 2 and 6. They are particularly high in reading because of the school's consistent, daily focus on improving each pupil's skills, knowledge and understanding. Parents give very good support. The headteacher and staff use assessment information very effectively to check carefully on the progress of every pupil. With this information, they target extra support or extension work to ensure that all achieve exceptionally well. As a result, more-able pupils sustain high standards. For example, some of the most able Year 6 pupils attain levels in mathematics that match those expected of pupils in Year 8. Those who find learning difficult make excellent progress and most attain nationally expected standards. The frequent and rigorous use of assessment enables staff to identify any areas of under-performance and to refine their teaching to improve them.

The inspirational leadership of the headteacher is a key factor in the school's effectiveness. She continually encourages the staff team to build on their success. There is no complacency. Many parents commented on her drive and strong leadership. One parent wrote 'She has extraordinary dedication and far-sightedness in her management of this school. She and her staff have very successfully managed to find a way to cater for all pupils with widely varying degrees of ability.' Teamwork is very strong - teams of staff and governors work excellently together to provide a high quality of education and to sustain outstanding standards in all aspects of school life. Governors maintain a high level of staffing to meet pupils' differing needs. They continually check the effectiveness of their decisions by rigorous and accurate self-evaluation. For example, teaching and learning have improved to become outstanding in response to regular observation and evaluation and teachers' willingness to share ideas.

Teachers carefully plan interesting lessons that match the full range of learning needs. Many use their excellent subject knowledge to extend pupils' skills, for example, in music and mathematics. Their outstanding partnership with the many learning-support assistants ensures that all pupils are included fully and given very effective support, individually or in small groups. Teachers use interesting methods, such as the creative use of interactive whiteboards, to grasp pupils' attention and promote an enjoyment of learning. Their very effective use of improvement targets, particularly in literacy and numeracy, helps pupils to gain a clear insight into how well they are attaining and how they can improve. As a result, pupils make excellent and consistent progress as they continually strive to achieve their learning targets. They are taking increasing responsibility for their own learning, for example, through self-assessment and the effective

use of laptops to enhance their work. The school recognises that pupils could take even more responsibility for their learning so that they can achieve even better.

The strong Catholic ethos permeates all aspects of school life and encourages a warm and happy learning atmosphere. There is a strong sense of community and excellent procedures ensure that pupils feel safe and secure. The influential ethos is supported very well by such initiatives as 'thinking hats' that raise pupils' self-esteem and develop their social skills. As a result, everyone gets on well together and shows respect and concern for others. This is reflected in the good work of the school council, especially when they organise events to raise funds for children less fortunate than themselves. Year 6 pupils take pride in helping their school by taking on responsibilities, such as prefects and house captains. They say 'We are the role-models for the younger ones.' Pupils have an excellent understanding of healthy and safe lifestyles. This is evident when Year 5 pupils organise and sell healthy snacks at break-time and when a high proportion of pupils daily eat the healthy lunches provided by the school kitchen. Pupils' involvement in organising many fund-raising activities and lessons in financial capability prepare them very well for their future economic well-being.

Pupils succeed in many areas. They enjoy an outstanding curriculum that is enhanced very well by an excellent range of clubs and trips. They enthusiastically take up the excellent opportunities to develop their musical skills and use them in public performances. Those with particular gifts and talents, for example, in sport or science, are encouraged to extend their skills, often in collaboration with other local Federation schools. One pupil commented, 'There is something for everybody!' Staff, and particularly the headteacher, know each child personally and work very hard to meet their needs. The school has made outstanding improvement since the last inspection. It has an accurate view of its own effectiveness, and gives outstanding value for money. Its capacity to maintain high standards and the high quality of education is evident in the drive for continued improvement by the headteacher, staff and governors.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 1

Children settle quickly and happily into Reception class. Effective arrangements introduce them to school life and the friendly, caring, learning environment. Children enjoy an interesting, creative and very well-organised range of learning activities that includes a very good balance between those that are directed by adults and those of their own choosing. The very good teamwork between the two teachers and teaching assistants ensures that they continuously assess and record how well each child is achieving. They share this information and use it very effectively to inform teaching and to target the progress of each child. This excellent teaching helps children to achieve outstandingly well, and most exceed the standards expected of them by the time they enter Year 1.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase the opportunities for pupils to take responsibility for their own learning.

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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?	1
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?	1
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1
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 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	1
The behaviour of learners	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	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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	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

29 February 2008

Dear Children,

Inspection of St. Thomas More Catholic Primary School, Saffron Walden, CB11 3DW

Thank you for making me feel so welcome when I visited your school recently. I enjoyed talking to you about what you do in school, looking at your work and watching you learn. You clearly enjoy school and, together with your parents, you think that it gives you an outstanding education - I agree with you.

I was pleased to see how well you get on together. I particularly liked the way that the older pupils looked after the younger ones. Your behaviour is excellent and this helps teachers get on with the job of helping you to learn. It was interesting to talk to school councillors about how they are helping to improve the school and to raise funds for other children who are less fortunate. I would like to give special thanks to the group of Year 6 pupils I talked to who told me all about life at St. Thomas More.

You told me that you learn a lot in school and enjoy your work, especially the interesting after-school clubs, visits and visitors. I think that you learn very successfully. Your teachers make your lessons interesting. You try hard to do what your teachers say to achieve your learning targets. Mrs. Hall and all the staff constantly try to help you learn as well as possible. I have asked them to encourage you take more responsibility for your own learning so that you achieve even better.

Thank you again for helping me to find out about your school and I hope that you will continue to be happy and to work hard.

Colin Henderson

Lead inspector