

St Helen's Catholic Infant School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115307
Local Authority	Essex
Inspection number	311906
Inspection date	21 May 2008
Reporting inspector	Patricia Cox

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

Type of school	Infant
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	4-7
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	230
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Ann Camp
Headteacher	Mrs Sheila Rainsford
Date of previous school inspection	10 May 2004
School address	Queen's Road Brentwood Essex CM14 4EY
Telephone number	01277 215626
Fax number	01277 201114

Age group	4-7
Inspection date	21 May 2008
Inspection number	311906

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector. The inspector focused on the difference in attainment between English and mathematics; how well pupils are prepared for life in a culturally diverse society; and how well they develop their independence, particularly their involvement in the process of measuring how well they are making progress.

Evidence was gathered from classroom visits, discussions with staff, governors and pupils, scrutiny of parents' questionnaires and examination of school documents, especially assessment data. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail but the inspector found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation form, were not justified and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Few pupils receive free school meals, but the school does not provide cooked meals and therefore this figure may not reflect their true entitlement. The majority of pupils are of White British backgrounds and the proportion from minority ethnic groups is below average. Few pupils have a first language other than English. The proportion of pupils who have learning difficulties is lower than the national average. Attainment on entry varies considerably. Most children are extremely able, but when they start school, many have not developed the skills and knowledge that would reflect their full ability. This is particularly the case for mathematics.

The school has been awarded the sports ActiveMark. It is to move in spring 2009, to a new building close to its partner junior school. There has been a considerable turnover of teachers recently and almost half are in their first or second year of teaching.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Parents and their children very much appreciate the extremely caring atmosphere of this good school; its Catholic ethos pervades its life and work, and pastoral care is a considerable strength. In addition, St Helen's has improved very well academically since the previous inspection and pupils now make good progress. This is due to the headteacher's great commitment, drive and determination, focused on removing any trace of underachievement. Through her close and very effective working partnership with the deputy headteacher and governors, she has ensured that the staff work as a united team with increasingly high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They set challenging targets for individuals and classes and these are usually achieved and often exceeded. There are rigorous methods for finding out how well the school is doing and evaluations are accurate, although occasionally rather modest. All staff with leadership and management responsibilities carry them out well, even though some have taken on their roles quite recently. Governors have good strategies for checking that the school's initiatives are bearing fruit. Areas that need improvement are identified rapidly and action to bring about improvements is well focused. Leaders regularly check the impact of initiatives to ensure that they are effective.

As a result of effective strategies to develop teachers' expertise, teaching has improved and in some instances it is excellent. Consequently, standards have risen significantly over the past four years. Since 2006, they have been exceptionally high, as they are again this year. Almost all pupils reach the expected standard and about half are working above this level. They are extremely articulate and use a rich vocabulary to explain their ideas. Standards are particularly high in reading and writing, and higher than in mathematics. When they enter school, standards in mathematics are lower than in other areas of learning. Pupils make good progress in English and mathematics in each year. However, they do not make up the ground in mathematics, particularly in using and applying their mathematical knowledge. Standards are above those expected in information and communication technology (ICT), and art and design. This is also the case for science, but attainment is lower than it could be. The school identifies and supports the most able pupils and when they are given suitably challenging activities, they do well. Learning support assistants play a valuable role in helping pupils to keep up and therefore pupils who find learning more difficult also make good progress.

Teachers are enthusiastic and use a wide range of interesting resources to involve pupils. There are very good relationships between pupils and adults and lessons move on briskly, with a good pace. There is a quiet buzz of productive activity. Teachers make it clear to pupils what they are going to learn and ensure that they know which outcomes will demonstrate that they have succeeded. These desired outcomes, however, are the same for all pupils rather than being more challenging for the more able. Teachers know their pupils well and have an accurate understanding of the levels at which they are working. They often use this to set tasks at the right level for different groups, but the match of work to pupils' abilities is not always close enough. Consequently, they sometimes find their activities too difficult or not challenging enough. Marking is extremely useful in showing pupils how well they have done and what they need to do to improve.

There are other reasons for the pupils' good achievement; for example, the school tracks their progress carefully and intervenes rapidly with good support systems for any who appear to be falling behind. Parents are very supportive of their children's progress and are kept well informed by the imaginative weekly newsletters, which also have links to the curriculum the pupils are

studying. The pupils also play an important role. From the time that children start school, teachers help them to develop their independence and their considerable abilities are harnessed to promote more rapid progress. Most are extremely attentive in class and concentrate on their work with close attention. As they move through the school, pupils are increasingly encouraged to assess the quality of their own work, through a variety of methods. For example, in some classes they will draw a 'smiley face', its expression showing how well they think they have met the purpose of the lesson. Older children are encouraged to mark their own or others' work to identify the key features. The very rich and varied curriculum provides a secure platform for progress. It is enlivened by very productive links between subjects, particularly the use of English and ICT through the curriculum. Frequently, lessons are based on practical activities, for example, the visit to the local common for scientific research, which also provided materials for very striking pieces of art. A wealth of visits, visitors, and particular days or weeks focused on specific topics enlivens pupils' learning.

The school's high quality of care ensures that pupils develop into sensible, thoughtful and confident individuals who are prepared exceptionally well for the next stage of education and their future lives in a culturally diverse society. Pupils have a keen sense of right and wrong and a good awareness of their own and other cultures. The school's mission statement, 'love one another', is evident in their usually excellent behaviour and the very good relationships between pupils from different ethnic groups. Effective systems successfully improve the behaviour of those who find it difficult to control theirs. Through the effective personal, social and health education programme and work in science, pupils are well aware of how to stay healthy and safe. They enjoy school, particularly the very good range of visits and visitors that enhance the curriculum. Most pupils' attendance is good, although, in spite of the school's best efforts, some parents persist in taking their children on holiday during term time. Pupils contribute extremely well to the school community, through the many responsibilities they willingly undertake. The sterling work of the school council has a major influence in the school, such as their involvement in the recent interview and appointment of a new member of staff. Contributions to the wider community are through links with the local church, the collections they make for charity and their contact with a school in Kenya.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Through efficient leadership of the Reception year, staff ensure that children get off to a good start. The curriculum is planned well, based on the new national model. When children start in Reception, some of their mathematical skills are lower than the other areas of learning. While they achieve well overall, and standards are above those expected by the time they enter Year 1, the gap between these mathematical skills and other areas of learning has not closed. Children have many opportunities to develop their facility with language and to make independent choices in a well-designed environment. Among these choices is that of making decisions about the planning of the topics they are to study. Their ICT skills are developed well so that children are adept at using a variety of computer programs by the end of the year.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that standards in mathematics and science match more closely those in reading, from Reception onwards.
- Ensure that the work set for pupils and the expectations of their attainment match the abilities and needs of different groups more closely.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
---	----------------

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?	1
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1
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	2
The attendance of learners	2
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?	2
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?	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	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	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

22 May 2008

Dear Children

Inspection of St Helen's Infant School, Brentwood, CM14 4EY

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to your school and want to thank you for helping to make it such a fascinating day. A lot of you helped to make the day very interesting, especially the children I had lunch with, the very impressive school council and the six children from Year 2 who told me so many important things about your school. I thought you might like to know what I found out.

You told me that you go to a good school and I agree. Many of you are very fast learners and your teachers help you to learn quickly. There are lots of exciting things to do. So by the time you leave the school your reading, writing, maths and science are much better than most other children, although maths and science aren't quite as good as reading and writing. I've asked your teachers to help you to do even better in maths and science and you can help by trying your hardest. You also do really well in ICT and art, and are good at showing your teachers how well you think you are doing in lessons.

You work hard and concentrate on your lessons, although it's a pity that some of you miss some of your school lessons to go on holiday. You behave very well and the adults take excellent care of you. Your headteacher and the teachers are very keen for you to do as well as you can, so they have worked hard to make the school better. You said that a lot of lessons were interesting and you had fun but that sometimes the work was a bit easy or hard for you. I think you're right, so I've asked your teachers to make sure it's just right.

I am sure that you will do really well at St Helen's and your next school, because you've made a good start.

My best wishes

Pat Cox

Lead inspector