

St Nicholas CE VA Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117431
Local Authority	HERTFORDSHIRE LA
Inspection number	312611
Inspection dates	22–23 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Martin Beale

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	198
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Jose Faldes
Headteacher	Mrs Jane Cogan
Date of previous school inspection	7 April 2003
School address	St Nicholas Close Elstree Hertfordshire WD6 3EW
Telephone number	0208 9533015
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Age group	3–11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This below average sized school has an attached morning-only Nursery. It draws its pupils from a wide range of backgrounds. Pupil mobility is higher than in many primary schools. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds is above average. A small, but increasing, number are learning English as an additional language, although they have mostly been at the school for a very short time. The number of pupils identified with learning difficulties is in line with the national average.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The school accurately assesses its effectiveness as satisfactory. Pupils help to make it a harmonious place in which to learn and develop by behaving well and treating others with respect. Their welfare is secure so they feel confident and safe. Staff and governors have the support of parents, who are happy with all that they are trying to do for their children. However, a minority of parents feel that the school could respond more constructively to their concerns, and that communication could inform more.

From attainment on entry as expected of three-year-olds, achievement is satisfactory and standards are close to the national average by Year 6. The progress of pupils has improved in mathematics and science in recent years, but has remained lower in English because of weaknesses in the pupils' writing. Girls do better than boys in reading and writing. The teaching of writing is receiving attention and has improved although it has yet to lead to sustained improvements in the pupils' achievement over time. This is because opportunities are missed to set high expectations of the quality of writing by pursuing writing targets in subjects other than English.

Classrooms are calm and pupils engage purposefully in their lessons. Pupils who have fallen behind the school's expectations, or who have learning difficulties, are catered for well. There are specific programmes based on the careful identification of their needs, sharply defined targets and the effective deployment of support staff. Effective links with other agencies are used to provide guidance for the support of their specific learning needs. By contrast, more able pupils are not consistently challenged by teaching or the tasks they are given. Improving teaching and learning is a continued priority for the school. The turnover of staff has limited its ability to develop the consistency of teaching needed to raise pupil achievement faster. This has also led to shortcomings to provision in the Foundation Stage, where the emphasis on literacy and personal development results in teachers and support staff paying too little attention to other important aspects of the children's learning.

Pupils enjoy school, particularly the additional activities provided. They have positive attitudes to their learning and older pupils take their responsibilities seriously. Pupils work happily in groups, are self-confident and act responsibly towards each other. The school has 'Healthy Schools' accreditation as recognition of the focus on improving diet, fitness and the well-being of all. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Their personal qualities and basic skills give them a sound basis for the next stage in their school careers.

The headteacher, senior staff and governors have a clear picture of the school's qualities and the action needed to improve the pupils' achievement, although staff changes have frustrated efforts to move forward in some areas. Strong leadership for pupils with learning difficulties and in mathematics has led to improved provision and better achievement. Systems are now more robust to cope with staff changes and sustain improvements, giving the school a sound platform from which to move forward.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 4

The school's leadership has correctly identified that provision for children in the Foundation Stage is inadequate. There is a strong emphasis on literacy, and children make satisfactory progress in developing early reading and writing skills. However, this takes up too much of the

curriculum time and does not integrate with other aspects of learning. As a result, the focus on creative, mathematical, and physical skills and knowledge and understanding of the world is limited and progress is slow in these areas. Teaching is satisfactory in individual sessions and relationships are good, but planning is not sharply enough focused on the individual needs of children. They spend too long on sedentary tasks and there is little challenge and excitement. There have been significant changes to staffing and accommodation since the previous inspection. Rooms can be opened into one large space for joint work, and a new covered area offers greater potential for outdoor activities. The children's induction into Nursery and Reception is managed smoothly and they are cared for well. Children are settled and happy because of the focus on their personal, social and emotional development.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise pupils' achievement in writing, in particular that of boys, by giving more emphasis to meeting writing targets through work in all subjects.
- Improve provision in the Foundation Stage by ensuring that all aspects of learning for children of this age receive appropriate attention.
- Strengthen teaching by providing greater challenge to the learning of more able pupils.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall performance is judged 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

National test results and the school's assessments show that pupils make satisfactory progress during their time at the school. Progress in mathematics is better than in English, and is good in many classes. Boys did not do as well as girls in reading and writing assessments in 2007 at either Year 2 or Year 6. Assessments of Year 2 pupils have fluctuated in recent years, but rose in 2007 and were above average. Test results for Year 6 pupils fell slightly because of a drop in English results, caused by lower writing results. The proportion of Year 6 pupils reaching nationally expected standards in English was lower than in mathematics and science, as was the number reaching higher levels. Pupils with learning difficulties make satisfactory progress, and show good gains in their learning through specific intervention programmes.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils behave well in lessons and around the school. They work hard and maintain good levels of concentration. Pupils relate well to each other, so disputes or bad feelings are rare. Through the school council, pupils make a real contribution to the school's development. They enjoy raising funds for charities and taking part in other social activities, such as inter-school tournaments and competitions. Pupils learn how to cooperate with others in groups during lessons and in after-school activities. These activities also help them to develop a good understanding of the importance of healthy lifestyles. They become mature young people who get on well together and understand right from wrong. Pupils enjoy school and say, 'The best thing about this school is the people!' However, attendance is only average because of the irregular attendance of a small number of pupils.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

All members of staff have high expectations of the pupils' behaviour and their response to lessons. Pupils feel confident that their contributions will be valued, however small they might be. As a result, relationships are warm and there is a positive atmosphere in all classes. Teachers are developing skills in using interactive whiteboards to add interest to their lessons, and digital cameras are used creatively in some classes to record work and achievement. However, some opportunities are missed to identify in lesson planning when computers could be used by pupils. Assessment has developed well for English and mathematics. Work is adapted and learning assistants contribute well to meeting the needs of pupils with learning difficulties, but the thinking of more able pupils is not consistently challenged. Marking is regular and tells pupils whether their work is right or wrong, but is not sufficiently refined to help them identify their personal next steps in learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The curriculum provided in the Foundation Stage focuses too much on the formal development of literacy at the expense of other areas of learning. There is a better balance to developing basic skills of literacy and numeracy in Years 1 to 6. The development of writing now has more structure in English lessons, but opportunities are missed to develop the pupils' writing in some other subjects, for example science. The school is starting to develop enquiry skills in science, but teachers do not consistently challenge pupils to plan, carry out and interpret their investigations. The teaching of modern languages adds interest, and activities such as 'International Day', where each class studied the customs and cultures of different countries, add an extra dimension to the pupils' experiences. Pupils value the additional activities such as clubs and trips, some benefitting from the school's links with other providers and local secondary schools.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

The school takes the pupils' safety and welfare seriously and meets requirements for safeguarding their well-being. The result is that pupils say they feel safe and there is always an adult to turn to if they have a worry. The small number of pupils recently arrived from abroad are helped to settle quickly and made to feel at home. Other services such as the provision before and after school are much valued by pupils and their families for the support they give. Through careful assessment of pupils in English and mathematics, the school identifies those who are falling behind. From this, it can put in place carefully targeted programmes run with success by support staff to help them catch up. Pupils generally know their group targets but these are not always sufficiently demanding of the more able. Teachers do not consistently use these targets in other subjects to improve the quality of the pupils' writing.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The headteacher and acting deputy have a clear and realistic view of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. They have a determination to raise standards further. Plans are in place to tackle areas identified through accurate self-evaluation. In particular, advice and support has been sought to improve the provision for children in the Foundation Stage. Where intervention has been planned and undertaken, such as for pupils with learning difficulties, this has resulted in improved achievement. The headteacher is keen to involve other staff in leadership roles in order to improve pupils' achievement more quickly, but has been thwarted in this by staff changes. Governors support the school and have an awareness of its effectiveness, although many are new to their roles. They are putting systems in place so that they can gain a more informed view of the school's qualities, although these have only been in place for a short time and have had little time to impact upon performance.

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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?	3
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	4
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
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	3
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

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

26 November 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Nicholas CE VA Primary School, Elstree, Hertfordshire, WD6 3EW

I am writing to thank you very much for the warm welcome you gave to us when we visited your school. You were all very helpful. We enjoyed talking to you and your teachers and watching you learn. You also told us how much you like your teachers.

You make satisfactory progress during your time at school. You enjoy school, work hard and behave sensibly. The care and support you receive, particularly when you are newly arrived at school, help you to settle in well. The school is good at providing support for those of you who find learning difficult. You understand the importance of diet and exercise for a healthy lifestyle and how to stay safe at all times.

Your teachers and governors are trying hard to make the school better. We think that there are things that can be even better so we have asked your teachers to:

- Improve the way the youngest of you learn in the Nursery and Reception.
- Give you more opportunities to improve your writing.
- Help those of you who find the work easy to learn more quickly in all subjects by providing work that really makes you think.

Some of you do not attend regularly enough and several of you arrive late for school in the morning! If this sounds like you, then please try to do better. You can also help your school to improve by continuing to try your best and help each other.

We wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Martin Beale