

St Mary's Catholic Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118759
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	313076
Inspection date	27 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Selwyn Ward

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	
School	359
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Phillip Sandey
Headteacher	Elizabeth Leaman
Date of previous school inspection	24 March 2003
School address	Northwood Road Whitstable CT5 2EY
Telephone number	01227 272692
Fax number	01227 770907

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector, who evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and particularly investigated the impact of measures taken to raise standards in science and the progress of more able pupils. Parts of some lessons were observed, parents' questionnaires and a sample of pupils' work were examined and school information, including self-evaluation, was scrutinised. The inspector found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in the report.

Description of the school

The school is larger than average. Pupil numbers have risen steadily since the last inspection as the school has gradually increased in size from approximately 45 up to around 60 pupils in each year group. Most pupils are now taught in single-age classes, although one mixed-age class currently remains.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Mary's is a good school. Parents certainly share this view. Several describe the school as 'fantastic'. As one put it, 'St Mary's provides a well run and caring environment which encourages Christian attitudes.'

The excellent arrangements for pupils' care and welfare help ensure that, from the Reception Year onwards, children feel safe and secure. A parent, typically, said, 'I am always happy to send my children to school confident in the knowledge that they will be well looked after.' This, in turn, contributes to pupils' enthusiastic enjoyment of school. Many parents comment on how much their children love coming to school, although one bemoaned that this eagerness depressed spirits at Christmas because her child 'wasn't happy at there being no school!' Pupils' personal development is outstanding and results in their being extremely attentive and keen to learn in lessons. Their love of learning spills out beyond the school gate, as even some of the youngest children talk approvingly of their homework. Pupils' behaviour is exemplary and pupils take very seriously their many responsibilities as, for example, monitors and play leaders. Many take part in the good range of sports, music and other clubs on offer, and they get involved in the wider community through, for example, charity fund raising activities. Pupils develop a keen appreciation of the need to lead a healthy lifestyle; they readily accept the need for a healthy diet, although some begrudge the loss of chocolate cake from the school lunch menu.

The school's aims state, 'We value all our children equally, but we also value their right to be different and to excel in different ways'. There is definitely no shortage of opportunities for pupils to achieve across a wide range of different subjects. A good curriculum links subjects together so that pupils develop their skills through topics that capture their imagination. The school's very strong music tradition means that large numbers learn to play instruments or sing in the choir. Specialist teaching in this subject for all pupils helps many to excel in music. Standards have been consistently above average over recent years, and continue to be so, although higher in some subjects than others. High standards in English are a consistent feature at St Mary's, and school leaders are exceptionally effective at driving improvements so that standards are now almost as high in mathematics too. Pupils of all abilities, including the many able pupils, achieve well because the teaching is good. Teachers have consistently high expectations of what their pupils can do and they set them challenging work. Pupils in Years 3 and 4, for example, using their knowledge of angles, successfully rose to the 'nightmare' problem-solving challenge set for them by their teacher. They succeeded because they were encouraged to take a step-by-step approach to resolving a complex problem through the motto 'every great journey starts with a single step'. The excellent academic guidance, given to pupils through individual targets and teachers' marking, helps to drive standards up by setting out clearly to pupils how their work can be improved. There is a commendable focus throughout the school on encouraging the essential basic skills of accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation and on pupils learning multiplication tables. The good progress that pupils make in developing their literacy and numeracy skills prepares them well for the next stage of their education.

It is in science where progress and standards have lagged behind. School leaders are thorough in their analysis and evaluation of why this is so. They correctly identified that this is a subject where some teachers lacked confidence, and so they put in place training and support for staff to ensure that pupils have more opportunities to learn science through experimentation and

discovery. Links with local secondary schools and local firms, including links developed through governors, are used to further enliven the science curriculum and raise pupils' achievement. The curriculum has also been reorganised to take account of important gaps in pupils' scientific understanding so that knowledge and skills are now taught more systematically as pupils move through the school. These measures have had a notable effect on standards in the lower part of the school, but the legacy of the previous shortcomings in the curriculum mean that, for these pupils, some gaps remain in their knowledge and understanding. As a result, standards in science in Years 5 and 6 are still only average and pupils are not achieving as well in science as they are in other subjects. It is this that stops this good school from being judged outstanding.

Leadership and management are outstanding because, despite the school's many successes, there is no sense of complacency. St Mary's is a school where the headteacher, governors and the entire staff team share in their commitment to push for even greater success. The headteacher, leadership team and governors have an extremely accurate picture of how well the school is doing and of areas for its improvement. The highly effective action they have taken to maintain such high standards in English, improve provision and raise standards in mathematics, and the more recent carefully focused attention to improving science, show the school's excellent capacity to move forward. School leaders' monitoring of performance is rigorous and swift action is taken to give pupils and staff extra support where it is needed. 'Focus groups', for example, direct additional support to boost performance of particular groups of pupils, including that of more able pupils, to ensure they continue to make the progress expected of them. The transition to a school with an intake of 60 pupils in each year group has been very well managed, so that the distinctive character and strengths of the school have been maintained. This move has been successfully achieved despite the potentially disruptive effects of phased building works.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Parents are especially pleased with 'the smooth transition from pre-school to Reception'. Children are helped to settle in well and they quickly develop in confidence and independence in what parents describe as 'a calm supportive environment'. Children start school with skills and capabilities that are generally above those expected for four-year-olds. The good progress they make means that children are now leaving the Reception Year with standards that are significantly above national expectations in all areas of learning. Facilities for the Foundation Stage are good, although the classes have to make do with a cramped space for outdoor play.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards in science by filling the gaps in older pupils' knowledge and understanding.

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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	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

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	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	2

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?	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	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	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

27 March 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Whitstable, CT5 2EY

Thank you for making me so welcome when I came to visit your school today. I am writing to tell you what I found.

You are obviously proud of your school, and rightly so. St Mary's is a good school. All the staff and governors work exceptionally well together to make the school the success it is. That is one of the reasons why the teaching is good and standards are high in English and mathematics. You do very well, too, in many of the other subjects you learn, and particularly music. I loved listening to the fantastic performances in your concert. Although things are improving, the subject you do not all do as well in is science. Some of you in the older classes, in particular, are not making as much progress in science as you should because there are still some gaps in your understanding. These gaps date from when the curriculum was not as well organised as it is now and you did not do as many experiments and investigations. I have asked the school to give particular attention to this.

I was very impressed with the exemplary behaviour I saw while I was with you and the excellent concentration you all show in lessons. Well done! Thanks are also due to your teachers, who do such a good job setting you challenging work and giving you interesting activities to tackle. I could see how much you enjoy all the different subjects you learn and several of you told me about all the clubs that you take part in, especially for music and sport.

Staff look after you extremely well, and I was pleased to see that your teachers' marking gives you all very clear guidance on how to make your work even better. Do make sure you always read their comments carefully and follow their advice.

Best wishes, Selwyn Ward Lead inspector