

St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided First School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	122311
Local Authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	314263
Inspection dates	19–20 September 2007
Reporting inspector	Brian Padgett HMI

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

Type of school	First
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	4–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	129
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Ms Hilary Robson
Headteacher	Mrs Patricia Telfer
Date of previous school inspection	1 November 2003
School address	Hencotes Hexham Northumberland NE46 2EE
Telephone number	01434 603791
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector. Following a complaint to Ofsted from a group of parents of children at the school, inspectors held a meeting prior to the inspection to which all parents were invited in order to listen to their views.

Description of the school

The school serves the Catholic community within Hexham and the surrounding district. Children's families are from diverse social and economic backgrounds. On the whole, pupils are drawn from families from more advantaged backgrounds. Only four per cent of children are eligible for a free school meal. Nearly all children are of White British heritage with just a few children from minority ethnic groups. The school has recently admitted a small number of children from Eastern Europe. These children are in the early stages of learning English.

The proportion of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities within the school is similar to that seen in most schools (18%). However, the children are not distributed evenly through the school. In some years the proportion is high and in others, low. Two children have a statement of special educational need.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

St Mary's provides a satisfactory quality of education for its children. They are happy and cared for well. The school has a good ethos. It has the feeling of a close family, with many references to its Catholic foundation. Parents like and appreciate the ethos of the school and how their children feel safe and cared for by the staff.

Children's achievement is satisfactory. Children of all abilities generally enjoy their work and make satisfactory progress. Standards vary from year to year, ranging from average to above average, depending on the overall ability of children within each year group. Children's personal development is good. They know how to stay safe and to lead healthy lives. They grow in confidence and self-esteem during their time at the school and make a positive contribution to its running through the school council and by taking on responsibilities around the school.

The quality of teaching and learning are satisfactory. The teaching and support staff form a relatively new team. Lessons are generally satisfactory, some with good features and just a few with unsatisfactory elements. Relationships with children in lessons are good and most aspects of teaching, such as planning, teachers' subject knowledge, and the use of support staff, are sound. However, marking, making sure the work is hard enough, providing a range of activities in a lesson to maintain interest, including allowing children the opportunity to work independently, are all aspects that could be improved.

The curriculum is satisfactory. It is enriched through a number of visits to places of interest within Hexham and in the North East, making good use of the local environment. The care for children is of good quality. The school's partnerships with children's services, other schools and the diocese are strong. The guidance provided to children about their learning, including those with learning difficulties, is satisfactory, and this is an area that the school has identified for development. The school's plans to make better use of data are being implemented, and involve children closely in assessing their progress and in setting challenging targets for their future work.

The leadership and management of the school are satisfactory. The headteacher has successfully created a cohesive team of staff committed to improvement, and has maintained the high quality of ethos and care that parents prize. The governing body provides good support for the headteacher and governors are very involved within the school. There are some areas for improvement. Most importantly, not enough management time is spent monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in lessons to support improvement. Further, although senior staff know the school well, the quality of the self-evaluation documentation is inadequate. The role played by teachers with management responsibilities is developing. The recent focus has been on the induction of teachers new to the school. These teachers are now beginning to take on leadership and management roles.

The recent reorganisation of classes caused concern amongst some parents, resulting in a complaint to Ofsted. A parents' meeting was held prior to the inspection where inspectors listened to parents' views. Inspectors found the quality of provision in the re-structured classes to be no different from that in other classes and therefore, that the fears of some parents have no grounding in practice. However, the school's leadership and management recognise that the school's partnership with parents must be improved. Senior staff and governors have demonstrated their commitment to do this. They have the full support of the local authority and the diocese and have the capacity to improve.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

The quality of provision in the Foundation Stage (Reception) is good and is a strength of the school. Leadership and management of Reception are good. The classroom is organised to make best use of the generous space available, both inside and outside, to provide well for all areas of learning. Resources are of high quality. Children quickly settle into the carefully planned routines of the day. After just two weeks in school, children move confidently and purposefully from one activity to another, engaging well with the teacher and teaching assistants. Teaching is good and the work of support staff is well coordinated. There is close liaison with the adjacent private nursery and close working with children's services that ensure that children with learning difficulties are identified early and receive appropriate support. Children generally enter Reception with developmental levels slightly above those of most children of their age. They make good progress and nearly all children reach and many exceed the Early Learning Goals for the start of Year 1.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve teaching and learning by better marking of children's work, the use of a wider range of teaching strategies in lessons, giving children harder work wherever this is appropriate, and providing more opportunities for the children to learn independently.
- Improve leadership and management through more rigorous monitoring of teaching and learning, with self evaluation more clearly linked to how well children are achieving.
- Improve the partnership with parents through better consultation, improved communication and through greater involvement of parents in the life of the school.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness 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

Children's achievement is satisfactory and standards are generally above average.

Nearly all children enter Year 1 having reached the Early Learning Goals for children of this age, and many are working at levels above these. They make satisfactory progress in Key Stage 1 and generally reach above average levels in reading, writing and mathematics in the Year 2 national tests and assessments. In some years, standards fall to average, but this is fully explained by the high proportion of children who have difficulty with learning in such years. Children with learning difficulties make similar progress to the other children. The few children who have arrived from Eastern Europe are making very good progress in learning English.

Children in Key Stage 2 also make satisfactory progress. They undertake tests in Year 4 and formal assessments by teachers before moving to their middle schools. Standards in these tests and assessments range from broadly average to above average, and they are generally above those of other first schools in the county. Children's performance in reading, writing and mathematics varies from year to year. At present, reading performance is stronger than that in writing, and writing is a focus for improvement.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Children's personal development and well-being is good. This is a strength of the school. Children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are good. They grow in self-esteem and confidence as they progress through the school, developing a strong sense of community. Older children care well for younger ones, reflecting the models of care and concern for others they see at school. Attendance is above average, behaviour is generally good, as are children's attitudes to learning. There are few instances of bullying or disruptive behaviour and children have confidence that the staff will deal with such instances effectively. The children's awareness of how to stay safe and how to live a healthy life are good. Their preparation for future school and working life is satisfactory. The work of the school council demonstrates that children are developing as young citizens, although their prospects for future economic well-being are tied to their academic achievement and would improve if this were higher.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The quality of teaching and learning are satisfactory. The quality of teaching and learning in Reception is good: provision is securely based on good Foundation Stage practice and children are encouraged to build skills in speaking and listening, and make an early start on reading, writing and number skills as soon as they are able.

The majority of the teaching in the school is undertaken by staff who are relatively new to the profession. They are continuing to develop their teaching skills. They have already established a strong sense of teamwork and their relationships with children are good. Subject knowledge, behaviour management, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to make lessons interesting, the deployment of support staff, and lesson planning are all satisfactory. Planning in Year 2/3 classes is of better quality, as teachers begin to base their teaching more closely to the different learning needs of the children.

There remain aspects of teaching that are weaker. Teachers do not always use a variety of activities in lessons to maintain children's interest. Too much is often already decided for children by the teachers; for example, how the children should record their work on worksheets. This means too little emphasis is given to children developing their independence and initiative. At times, the work is pitched at too low a level and children find the work too easy. Marking, also, is not as constructive as it should be to indicate how children can improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory. The school has invested significantly in the quality of its resources, following on from the last inspection, when resources were an area for improvement. The quality of resources is now good, especially in Reception with the development of the outdoor area, and in the ICT facilities. The curriculum is appropriately balanced and covers all subjects of the National Curriculum, religious education and French. The school has adopted the new Framework recommended by the government to teach basic skills, and it uses a range of intervention strategies to support children with learning difficulties, including those

children with statements of special educational need, and for those who are at an early stage of learning English.

The curriculum is enriched through a good quality programme of visits to places of local interest and by specialist teachers and visitors to the school. There are lunchtime clubs for extra-curricular activities, especially in music, and children have access to a wide range of out-of-hours activities in the local area, including a breakfast and after-school club in the private nursery adjacent to the school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

The care, guidance and support for children are satisfactory overall. The general level of care and concern for all children is high; this is acknowledged and appreciated by parents. Procedures for safeguarding children and keeping them healthy are all in place, although not all policies are reviewed and updated sufficiently often. The school works very closely with a wide range of children's services to ensure any special needs are identified early and action taken. This is especially effective for intervention for children with language, communication and speech delay.

The school is at the beginning stages of improving its academic guidance for children and the use of assessment to improve children's work. It is planning to do this through closer involvement of the children in deciding what they have learned, a nationally recognised strategy. At present, although the school analyses performance information, and sets curriculum targets at different levels, it does not set individual targets for children sufficiently well.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The quality of leadership and management is satisfactory. The headteacher and senior staff bring energy and commitment to their role and have been successful in building a new team with good morale to meet the challenges they face. The school is well organised and runs smoothly. The headteacher leads by example and sets a good ethos, with clear principles rooted in the school's Catholic foundation and faith. Issues raised by the previous inspection have been dealt with successfully.

The governing body is fully involved in the leadership and management of the school. It meets all its statutory duties. Governors have a regular programme of visits to the school and they report back on what they have seen. They have oversight of improvement areas and are well informed through briefings by members of staff. They should develop further their role in holding the school to account for its actions. The headteacher and the governors have the capacity to further improve the school and the local authority and the diocese have pledged their support.

Although the governors and senior staff know the school well, the quality of the self-evaluation is not adequate, and the priorities for improvement in the school improvement plans are not sufficiently geared to improving outcomes for the children. The leadership roles of staff other than senior staff are only at the development stage, although the induction of newly qualified teachers is managed well. Insufficient attention is given to monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in lessons to promote more effective teaching.

The school has built a number of effective partnerships with local schools, the faith community, and agencies of children's services. However, its partnership with parents is not strong enough. There is insufficient involvement of parents as a major stakeholder in the school's plans for improvement, because the views and involvement of parents are not routinely sought. The headteacher and governors are committed to rebuild the partnership with parents through improved consultation, communication and involvement.

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
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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	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2
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	2
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	4
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

21 September 2007

Dear Children

Inspection of St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided First School, Northumberland, NE46 2EE

A few weeks ago, Andrew Scott and I visited St Mary's to see how well you were doing at school. Thank you to those of you we spoke to during the inspection, especially to the group of children who spoke separately to Andrew about their views on the school.

We believe your school provides you with a satisfactory education. This means the school does most things perfectly well but there are some things it should do better.

We think St Mary's has a lovely family feel about it. We could tell straight away that this was a Christian school. You are developing strong values and are considerate to each other. You appear happy and secure and mostly you enjoy your learning. Some of you think you could do harder work and we agree. Children get an especially good start to their school lives in the Reception class (Wilfrid) and all through the school we saw that you got on well with your teachers. The teachers and staff care for you well as individuals and make sure you are safe. You normally reach standards in your work that are higher than most children of your age, but we thought you could do even better. To help you achieve more we have asked Mrs Telfer, her staff and the governors to improve lessons in certain ways and also make adjustments to the way the school is managed.

We have suggested that teachers make lessons more interesting for you by introducing more variety in the activities you take part in, more opportunities for you to work independently of your teacher (to develop your initiative), and, where you can manage it, to give you harder work. If your teachers do this, then for your part, you have to put your best efforts into lessons so that your standards become higher and that you meet your new targets. We have asked Mrs Telfer to set up the necessary checks so that all these things take place. We have also asked her and the governors to involve your parents more in the life and development of the school so that St Mary's plays an even more important part in the community.

On behalf of us both, I send you our best wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely

Brian Padgett HMI