

St Nicholas School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	101854
Local Authority	Croydon
Inspection number	323539
Inspection dates	22–23 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Kay Charlton

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

The registered childcare, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	114
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	0
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Andrew Tasker
Headteacher	Mrs Jean Melton
Date of previous school inspection	8 November 2005
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Reedham Drive Old Lodge Lane Purley CR8 4DN
Telephone number	020 8660 4861
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Age group	4–11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

St Nicholas is designated as a school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties and those on the autistic spectrum. In recent years there have been changes in the complexity of pupils' needs on entry, and a considerable proportion now have severe learning difficulties linked to autism. All pupils have a statement of special educational needs. Pupils come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, the most predominant being White British, Black African and Black Caribbean. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is above average. Many of these at the early stages of learning English. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) are taught in one of three Reception classes. The school has achieved Activemark and Healthy School awards. It provides an outreach service to primary schools throughout the local authority. The headteacher and senior team are well-established members of staff, but there have been recent changes of teaching staff.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

St Nicholas School continues to provide outstanding education, as was seen at the last inspection. The strong and determined leadership of the headteacher and senior team sets very high expectations, and fulfils their mission to provide the best for all of the pupils. The senior team are extremely effective in addressing the challenges brought about by the increasing complexity of pupils' needs. The school provides a very supportive learning environment in which all pupils make outstanding progress. Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school. Their comments, such as 'The teachers really do invest and care for your child like one of their own', sum this up.

Pupils' outstanding achievements are based on excellent teaching. Lessons are never less than good, and the great majority are of an extremely high quality. As a result, pupils enjoy their lessons and try hard. The assessment and recording of pupils' progress are very effective and are key strengths. This enables staff to plan learning carefully and to match work accurately to pupils' individual needs. It also means that they are able to intervene quickly if extra help is needed. The school's strong team of support staff makes an important contribution to pupils' learning. Teachers work very closely with them, so that pupils feel safe and secure and give of their best. The imaginative ways in which all staff use resources, such as information and communication technology, motivate pupils and ensure that learning is fun. Since the last inspection, the school has very successfully developed the skills of its staff in using specialist communication techniques, such as signing and pictorial systems, to meet the increasing complexity of its pupils' needs. There is still further to go, however, in ensuring that the small proportion of staff who are new to the school are fully conversant in using these techniques.

The curriculum is outstanding. Staff work with a wide range of outside professionals, who play an important part in creating a comprehensive range of interesting and well-resourced activities that are closely linked to the National Curriculum. The programmes for English and mathematics are a major strength and, combined with excellent teaching, result in pupils' outstanding progress in developing their basic skills.

Pupils thrive within the caring ethos of the school, and their personal development is excellent. All make substantial gains in their confidence and independence. They thoroughly enjoy school, and develop very positive attitudes to learning. Their behaviour is noticeably improved from when they first came to the school, and is outstanding overall. Staff place a strong emphasis on personal, social and health education, and pupils learn to respect and value themselves and others. They learn how to be healthy and keep themselves safe. They clearly value the school, and this is evident from the excellent relationships they have with staff.

The headteacher and senior team provide outstanding leadership. Since the last inspection, they have ensured that the school has continued to improve through a time of change. They are rigorous in checking the effectiveness of provision in classrooms, and actively work alongside staff, giving advice and support as needed. Whole-school evaluation procedures are thorough and, as a result, the school is clear about the most important areas in need of improvement. The governing body is supportive and monitors the school's work robustly. It helps the school in promoting excellent community cohesion through very strong links with others, including parents. The school's track record shows that it is extremely well placed to improve even further.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 1

Children achieve exceptionally well in the EYFS because of excellent teaching. Staff are experienced in working with children of this age, and provide a range of activities that are matched carefully to their needs. They place a high emphasis on children's personal development, and all children make substantial gains in developing independence and the social skills that form cornerstones for their future learning. The EYFS leader, who is part of the senior team, provides insightful leadership that ensures that the provision fully meets the requirements of the EYFS curriculum. A strong focus is placed on ensuring that children develop the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. Improved outdoor provision has ensured that the learning of the youngest children has been enhanced greatly since the last inspection.

What the school should do to improve further

- Develop the skills of new staff in using specialist communication techniques to ensure that, in all lessons, pupils' learning is of the very highest quality.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Pupils invariably reach or exceed the challenging targets that they are set. As a result of their learning difficulties, the standards that they reach by age 11 are far below those expected in mainstream schools. Even so, this represents excellent achievement given their starting points. The high quality of support for pupils with the most severe learning needs ensures they make outstanding progress in very small steps. Pupils who speak English as an additional language are also supported very effectively, so that they make similar progress to their peers. All pupils make excellent progress in their acquisition of basic skills, including the use of information and communication technology, and this has an appreciable impact on their achievement throughout the curriculum.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils' excellent personal development reflects the school's positive management of behaviour, and the belief that 'there is always a way forward'. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are outstanding, and their response to each other's achievements, as seen in assembly where both the choir and the recorder group performed, is impressive. The school encourages pupils to work together wherever possible. As a result, they make friends and get on very well together in a racially harmonious atmosphere. The ways in which Year 6 pupils help those in Reception is excellent and benefits both groups. Bullying is rare. Pupils say that they feel safe and they know what to do should any occur. Pupils' attendance is good; the overall rate is affected by the medical conditions of some pupils, but the school makes every effort to encourage all to attend regularly. Pupils learn the importance of a healthy lifestyle and participate very enthusiastically in physical activity, as is recognised in the school's Activemark and Healthy School awards. They make an excellent contribution to their local community and beyond - for example, through the school council, projects with local schools, and by raising funds to buy wheelchairs for pupils in a school in Kenya. The outstanding development of pupils' personal and basic skills means that they are extremely well prepared for the next stage of their education.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Assessment is meticulous. Staff capture every small step of the progress that pupils make and, in turn, set challenging and well-focused targets for further improvement. This careful attention to detail enables staff to plan interesting well-paced activities that fully match pupils' needs. The excellent relationships that are established between staff and pupils, and the consistent approach to managing behaviour, form the bedrock of pupils' successful learning. Staff work very effectively as teams, and support staff play a vital role in helping pupils to develop the confidence and skills that they need in order to succeed. Teachers and support staff have developed their practice in using a range of specialist communication techniques, in response to the increased complexity of pupils' needs, and this is working very well. In an exceptionally high-quality session seen in one of the Reception classes, the benefits of all staff being fully conversant with these techniques was evident for all to see because of the way that the children responded to the story of The three billy goats gruff. In the minority of lessons where teaching is good rather than outstanding, there is scope for staff who have recently joined the school to develop these skills further.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum is much improved since the last inspection. It is tailored extremely well to the range and complexity of pupils' needs. A strong emphasis on personal and social education underpins much of the school's work and has a definite impact on pupils' achievements. The school's excellent focus on the development of pupils' basic skills is extremely effective in promoting their access to learning across all areas. The wide range of enrichment activities, such as the Year 6 residential visit, enhances pupils' learning and adds to their enjoyment of school. These also provide very good opportunities for pupils to learn how they should act in the wider community. Music and physical education are particularly strong features of the provision. The very high-quality accommodation supports the curriculum very effectively.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Safeguarding procedures fully meet requirements, and the care provided for pupils is exemplary. There are excellent transition arrangements for the youngest children entering the school and for those leaving at age 11. Parents receive high-quality information about their child's progress in a range of ways, including through the daily home/school books and at annual review meetings. Pupils are involved, where possible, in agreeing their own targets, so that these guide their academic and personal development very effectively. The school works very well with a wide range of outside agencies, and with other schools, to support pupils' development.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Since the last inspection, the school's leaders have continued to drive forward improvements enthusiastically and, as a result, pupils' achievements continue to be excellent. The major

strength of the school is in the rigorous and effective way in which leaders monitor, evaluate and improve on every aspect of the school's performance. There are very thorough procedures to measure pupils' progress and to check on and improve the quality of teaching. Communication within the school is excellent. Staff feel fully consulted, involved and valued. There are very effective procedures to support new staff, and the quality of professional training is outstanding. This makes a major contribution to sustaining pupils' excellent achievement. Governors provide very strong support, visit classrooms regularly, and rigorously monitor the school's strengths and areas for development. They ensure that the school provides excellent value for money.

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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 capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	1
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	1
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	1
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	1
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	1

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are 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
The extent to which 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	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of 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

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 eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

05 February 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Nicholas School, Purley, CR8 4DN

Thank you for making me very welcome on my recent visit to your outstanding school. I enjoyed talking to you and looking at your work, and I was very pleased to be invited to a meeting of the school council. I could see that the staff look after you extremely well. Your behaviour is excellent, and I know that you like coming to school very much. You also like to keep healthy by being involved in sport and especially in rebound therapy. You told me that the staff and your friends help you, and that you like your lessons. I could see that you make excellent progress, because of the excellent teaching, and that staff make your lessons fun. All of the extra activities you do, such as the visit in Year 6 where you stay away from home, also make your school a great place to be.

I know that the staff have plans to make your school even better and you can help them by always trying your hardest. I have asked them to make sure the school develops the already good teaching skills of newer staff, so that they develop a high level of expertise in using systems, such as signing. This will ensure that learning in all of your lessons is of the very highest quality.

Yours faithfully

Kay Charlton

Lead Inspector