

St Mary's RC Infant School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104817
Local Authority	St Helens
Inspection number	324111
Inspection dates	22–23 October 2008
Reporting inspector	Lynne Read

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	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	3–7
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	225
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	Mrs Pauline Kruger
Headteacher	Mrs C Ryding
Date of previous school inspection	18 January 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Victoria Road Newton-le-Willows Merseyside WA12 9RX
Telephone number	01925 224 927
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Age group	3–7
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This average-sized infant school serves a community of average socio-economic advantage and the number of pupils entitled to free school meals is below the national average. Almost all pupils are of White British heritage and speak English as their first language. The percentage of those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below the national average. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) offers part-time Nursery places for children from the age of three years. During the past two years, the school has experienced many changes in staffing and management.

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 Catholic Infants is a good school and provides good value for money. Its popularity with parents is well deserved. Comments from the returned questionnaires include much praise for the fact that parents are encouraged to be involved in their children's education and for the 'secure, nurturing, positive environment'. Links with the church, other schools and outside agencies are good and provide valuable benefits for pupils' learning and personal development. Many combined school and church events help to develop pupils' sense of citizenship and promote good community cohesion. Due to factors beyond the school's control, many changes in staffing have occurred recently and the senior management team was depleted for some time. The fact that standards have been maintained or improved during this difficult period pays testimony to the headteacher's good leadership and hard work. The school has dealt successfully with all issues from the previous inspection and, with staffing issues now largely resolved, has good capacity to improve.

Achievement is good overall from an average starting point. Standards are significantly above average in reading and writing and above average in mathematics. Frequent assessments of progress are used to develop challenging 'next steps' for each pupil, which ensure a good pace to learning. A recent programme to improve literacy further has resulted in writing standards that are almost one year ahead of what is expected. An added focus on teaching sounds and letters, together with improved resources, supports good progress in reading. Pupils have a good understanding of mathematics but they do not apply their knowledge effectively enough when solving problems or engaging in practical investigations.

Pupils' personal development is good. The school provides a strong, caring ethos and great care is taken with children's induction into school, their transition within it and their move to junior school. Attention to safety issues meets requirements fully. As a result, pupils feel secure and thoroughly enjoy their learning. Teaching is good because work generally matches individual needs and interests. In reading and writing, there is plenty of scope for independent thinking. Work in mathematics tends to be prescriptive with fewer opportunities for pupils to follow a line of investigation or choose their own way of recording. There are effective catch-up programmes for pupils who are not meeting their targets and very good support for pupils who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The curriculum is good. Pupils understand the principles of healthy living and have varied opportunities to experience responsibility. This prepares them well for their future lives, while also contributing to the good community spirit in school. An interesting range of visits, activities and visiting specialists inject added interest and fun into learning.

Leadership and management are good. Established management systems continually evaluate provision, identify areas for improvement and develop the relevant plans for action. Governors are supportive but have recently lost key senior members. Their role in evaluating the performance of the school and acting as critical friends is therefore compromised to some extent. At present, governance is satisfactory.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning in the EYFS are good and sometimes excellent in the Nursery. Staff forge very good links with parents and provide them with information so they can support learning

effectively at home. One parent, expressing the views of many, wrote, 'The positive environment inspires the children to express themselves and develop their passion for learning.' Children's skills and knowledge at entry to school vary widely between individuals but are generally typical for the age group. A good programme of introducing them to school life means they settle quickly. Pupils' progress is assessed constantly and tasks are planned effectively to build on children's prior learning. Planning also takes account of children's interests in order to keep them well motivated. In the Nursery, tasks are extremely well linked in order to consolidate learning. For example, children learned about vegetables, made 'healthy soup', and had stories and songs around the theme of growing.

Behaviour is good and children are well versed in class routines. A good balance between adult-directed work and free-choice activity allows children to learn and consolidate new skills. They make good progress and, by the end of the year, their development exceeds local and national expectations. There are particular strengths in personal development, knowledge of the world and language skills. However, pupils' work in using mathematical ideas for problem solving is not as well developed, although it meets expectations. Standards of care are good; staff are most vigilant and children learn in a safe and secure environment. The extensive outside area is used imaginatively, especially by the Nursery, to support all aspects of learning.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve children's confidence in using mathematical ideas for problem solving in the EYFS and improve progress in practical and investigation work in mathematics through Key Stage 1.
- Ensure that key posts in the governing body are filled as soon as possible.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

The majority of pupils enter Year 1 with knowledge and skills exceeding expectations for the age group. They make good progress through Key Stage 1. By Year 2 standards are significantly above average in reading and writing, with a very good proportion of pupils attaining the higher level. Writing is a major strength and pupils have a secure understanding of style, grammar and punctuation. While standards in mathematics are above average they are not as strong as those found in reading and writing. Pupils are confident in number work and in their knowledge of shapes and measures. Skills in practical problem solving and carrying out investigations, for example looking at number patterns, are less securely developed. This work has been a focus for school development and some improvements are seen in the 2008 assessments by teachers but learning in lessons is still variable. Boys and girls do equally well. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have high self-esteem and progress well towards their targets.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils really enjoy coming to school and this is reflected in their good attendance and behaviour. They talk enthusiastically about their work and are keen to do well. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good overall, although pupils' understanding of the cultural diversity of British society is satisfactory. They willingly take on day-to-day responsibilities and the school council members are proud to be involved in making decisions. They are pleased that some of their ideas were used when planning the new playground. Together with the staff, they are looking at ways to create a calmer atmosphere in the dining hall at lunchtimes. Pupils

have a good understanding of staying safe, fit and healthy. For example, they make informed choices at lunchtime and eagerly join in 'wake up, shake up' activities. Community links are strong, for example the Harvest Festival in church was very well attended. Pupils considered how they could best distribute the produce, illustrating a strong desire to help those less fortunate. They leave the school with academic and personal skills that prepare them well for the future.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Pupils learn well because teaching is good. Teachers make the purpose of the lesson clear so pupils know what is expected. They are very effective in questioning and in encouraging discussion. Pupils' progress is assessed regularly and the information is used intelligently to plan the next steps. Those who have learning or emotional difficulties are well supported and the more able have extra challenges. Lessons sometimes include challenges or collaborative tasks that motivate pupils well and help to develop learning skills. In mathematics, however, there are too few opportunities for this type of practical work and an over-reliance on worksheets or workbooks restricts independent thinking to some extent. Teachers provide good encouragement and help for pupils during lessons. In writing, marking clearly indicates what pupils have done well and where they need to improve. It is less effective in mathematics. Parents are encouraged to share in their children's education. Useful workshops and meetings keep them well informed about progress and provide them with advice about how they can extend learning at home.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is well matched to pupils' interests and needs. Good links between subjects are developing and special themed events, such as the successful design and technology week, make learning exciting and meaningful for pupils.

Writing skills are used particularly well to support learning across the curriculum, for example pupils had produced good accounts of Florence Nightingale's life and work. There is, however, scope to increase the use of information and communication technology to support learning. A good programme of personal education contributes effectively to pupils' understanding of citizenship. Enrichment for learning is good. Pupils enjoy the after-school clubs, such as those for French, dance and art, which help to develop new skills and talents. An interesting range of visits and visitors further extend pupils' range of learning experiences and extend their horizons.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Pupils are well cared for and supported. There is a pleasant 'family' atmosphere in school and supervision is good at all times. Pupils feel safe and secure because relationships are good and, they say, 'There's always someone to talk over any little worries or concerns.' Systems for safeguarding pupils, including those for child protection, meet requirements fully. The school goes to great lengths to provide resources and expert support for pupils with learning, physical

or sensory difficulties. As a result, they are able to take a full and active part in school life. This is a strength of the school and the provision is highly praised by parents.

Guidance to help pupils with their learning is useful and is a current focus for improvement. Teachers track progress closely, identify the next steps for learning and set challenging targets. Good feedback is given during lessons so pupils know what they are doing well and where they need to improve. Staff are currently trialling and evaluating new ways of providing written advice for pupils to help them reach their targets.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are good and clearly focused on achieving high standards. Staff work as a good team; they are focused on providing the best for pupils. The recent changes in staffing and resulting lack of management personnel were handled very well through the determined, focused leadership of the headteacher. Disruptions to learning have been kept to a minimum, school development has gone ahead and, in spite of the difficulties, good standards have been maintained. It has, however, meant that some initiatives, such as developing guidance for pupils, have moved at a slower pace than intended. Senior managers and those for English and mathematics contribute effectively to the school's accurate evaluation of its performance. Detailed assessment and tracking records in reading, writing and mathematics are used to keep a close eye on achievement and standards, as well as the school's provision. Light-touch monitoring in the other subjects has ensured that provision is maintained and the reintroduction of the more rigorous, planned approach has already begun. The new development plan includes action to remedy any delays and sets an ambitious, but achievable, agenda for the coming year.

The governors are supportive but recognise that further recruitment and training is needed to develop their role in evaluating performance and driving the school forwards.

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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 capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	2
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	2
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	2
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	2
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	2
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	2

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/or disabilities make progress	2

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?	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
The extent to which 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	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of 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?	2

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	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	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

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

Thank you for the very warm welcome you gave my colleague and me when we inspected your school. We appreciated all the help you gave us and the interesting conversations we had. In return, I would like to tell you what we discovered.

St Mary's Catholic Infants provides you with a good start to your education. Those of you in the Nursery and Reception classes have lots of fun in your learning and are making good progress, especially with your early reading and writing. We were impressed with the way you can follow a story and spell simple words. You are also good at counting and you know lots of different shapes. We think it would be good if you had more opportunities to use your skills in a practical way, for example finding 'one less than' or comparing the difference between two numbers.

Those of you in Years 1 and 2 have worked hard to improve your writing skills – well done! We enjoyed reading some of your exciting stories. You work accurately with numbers but you are not quite so confident when it comes to solving problems, investigating number patterns or doing more practical tasks. So, we have asked your teachers to include more work of this type in your mathematics lessons. You are keen to learn so I am sure you will enjoy the new challenges that your teachers are planning to introduce.

Please thank your parents for sending lots of replies to the questionnaire. They are very pleased with the school. They think it is a happy place and say your teachers are 'caring and helpful'. Your governors help to look after the school. We have asked them to find some new people to replace those who have left recently. That way, they will find it easier to make sure everything runs smoothly.

Thank you once again for the interesting conversations we had. Your headteacher and her staff have some exciting plans to make your learning even more interesting. I hope you enjoy the changes they have planned and continue to enjoy your friendly school. Please accept my best wishes for the future and keep up the hard work!