

St Mary's VC Lower School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109606
Local Authority	Bedfordshire
Inspection number	324989
Inspection date	16 October 2008
Reporting inspector	Marianne Harris

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	First
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	4–7
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	216
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	45
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Street
Headteacher	Mr Colin Phelps
Date of previous school inspection	20 October 2005
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Rook Tree Lane Stotfold SG5 4DL
Telephone number	01462 730343
Fax number	01462 733419

Age group	4–7
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors who evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: the progress made in mathematics by pupils in Years 3 and 4, how target setting supports pupils' learning, and how effectively the school promotes community cohesion. Evidence was gathered from observing lessons, discussions with the headteacher, staff and governors, and analysing the school's system for tracking pupils' progress. In addition, inspectors spoke to pupils and analysed the school's documents.

Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors 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 this report.

Description of the school

This is an average-sized school, located in a rural area. Pupils are very largely from White British backgrounds. The proportion of pupils who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is lower than that usually seen. Although their needs vary, they mainly experience speech and communication difficulties. The school has provision for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and is responsible for before and after-school care for pupils up to the age of 12 years. When they join the school, children have skills and knowledge that are close to that expected for their age.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is an excellent school at the heart of its local community. Highly effective efforts are made to link the school and the community together. The excellent before and after-school clubs provide a much needed and appreciated service for both the pupils who attend the school and for the wider community. Parents are very supportive of the school and many describe it as 'outstanding'. Pupils are very proud of their school and comment that, 'Teachers are kind and care about us.' The pupils are particularly pleased with the amount of money they raise for local and national charities and the number of clubs and activities that are provided for them. The very effective links with local churches and schools ensure that pupils have a very good knowledge of cultures other than their own. They rapidly develop an understanding of different faiths through well-planned lessons and visits to various places of worship.

Pupils reach standards that are exceptionally and consistently high. By the end of Year 2, standards in reading, writing and mathematics are consistently high. Parents comment on the support that their children receive, especially those who have difficulties with speech and communication. All pupils achieve outstandingly well, whatever their starting point. The excellent progress that pupils make in Years 1 and 2 is maintained throughout the school. By the time they leave in Year 4, standards are considerably higher than those found nationally for pupils of this age. When the school's accurate analysis identified that pupils did not make enough progress in an aspect of mathematics in Years 3 and 4, this was addressed very successfully. The staff identified where and what the weaknesses in mathematics were, and put in place very effective strategies to support pupils in mental calculations. Pupils are now very secure and confident when calculating mentally and share their strategies with each other. Standards in other subjects are also exceptionally high. The school has achieved an Artsmark Gold Award and the quality of art work around the school is of a high standard. Singing in assembly is also of a high standard and pupils show great enjoyment in singing together. Clubs, such as that for art, make a significant contribution to these high standards. Pupils are very confident and skilled in using information and communication technology (ICT) and talk enthusiastically about the very good ICT resources available.

The emphasis on promoting pupils' personal development and well-being is extremely successful. Through the school council, pupils feel they have a voice in running the school. Basic skills are taught very effectively, including those in ICT. Consequently, pupils are extremely well prepared for the next stage of their education. Pupils are polite and friendly and greatly enjoy school life. They support each other in the playground, and pay special attention to those who have no-one to play with. The sense of community and warm relationships within the school are strong. Pupils feel extremely safe because there is 'always someone to sort out our problems'. Behaviour is exemplary. Pupils have a very good understanding of how to adopt healthy lifestyles and keep fit. They report that the school dinners are healthy and really good because they are 'home cooked'. Some pupils are confident when evaluating how healthy other people's dinners are. For example, they were reassured when they analysed the headteacher's lunch and judged it to be very healthy.

Pupils are extremely positive about learning because teaching is outstanding across the school. Leaders have been very successful in maintaining a very high and consistent quality of teaching. Planning of lessons is of a very high quality and work is based on what pupils know and understand. Consequently, it is suitably challenging and meets the needs of all pupils in the class. The purpose of each lesson is clearly explained and pupils are encouraged to assess for

themselves how much they understand, which they do with honesty and enthusiasm. Pupils take pride in their work, although sometimes there is very occasionally too many printed worksheets used and, when this happens, work is not always neatly presented. Teaching assistants are remarkably skilful at supporting pupils with special learning needs so that they are always fully involved in the lessons. This is particularly noticeable for pupils with speech and communication needs who receive one-to-one support so that they can make excellent progress. The excellent curriculum supports learning very effectively. Great emphasis is put on providing many additional learning experiences, including a residential trip for pupils in Year 4. Special themed weeks and days support pupils in learning about the wider global community, and allow them to explore many exciting activities, such as art from different continents. Of particular note is the remarkably wide range of visitors into school who enhance learning - for example, the Olympic gold medal winner who came to talk to all of the pupils.

Leadership and management at all levels are outstanding. The staff work together extremely well and there is an atmosphere of mutual respect. Governors are fully involved in the life of the school and many attend training days with the staff. This means that all are aware of the strengths of the school and areas are accurately identified for improvement. All staff take excellent care of the pupils. Procedures for child protection and ensuring safe recruitment are robust and firmly established. Setting academic targets for pupils is consistent throughout the school. These are very effectively displayed and pupils know what they are aiming at. This helps to ensure their excellent progress. Teachers often refer to targets in lessons, and remind the pupils when their progress towards these will be reviewed.

Since the time of the last inspection, the school has been extremely successful in maintaining extremely high standards. Weaknesses identified at the last inspection have been effectively tackled, and ways to further improve the school are successfully identified and achieved. All staff and governors share in drawing up the school plan for improving further and there is excellent capacity to do so, as shown by the outstanding quality of education and pupils' consistently high achievement. The headteacher and governors know their task is to maintain the excellent provision and high standards and they are excited by the challenge of this.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 1

Outstanding leadership and management of the EYFS ensures that provision here is excellent. All staff work together very effectively to promote children's welfare and provide a safe and stimulating environment for them. All are warmly welcomed and make excellent progress in their learning and development. Early reading and writing skills are taught very effectively so that children are soon confident to begin to write for themselves and they enjoy sharing their work. Particular attention is given to children's personal and social development so that they make outstanding progress. They settle into school very quickly, play and learn together extremely well and are very friendly. The two classes work together for most of the time and this encourages the children to make friends outside their own class. Teachers plan work that is exciting, based on themes and covers all areas of learning. There is a very good balance between work that children choose for themselves and activities that adults lead. Consequently, children gain confidence in working independently and concentrate for long periods of time. Children enjoy using the outside area very much indeed, especially the space for physical activities. Staff carry out thorough assessments and track the progress that each child makes highly effectively. This information is used carefully to plan learning. By the time they join Year

1, children achieve well in all areas of learning and reach standards that are well above those expected for their age.

What the school should do to improve further

- Reduce the number of printed worksheets used in lessons.

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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	1
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

17 October 2008

Dear Children

Inspection of St Mary's VC Lower School, Stotfold, SG5 4DL

As you know, we came into school recently, and you were very helpful in telling us all about your work. As promised, we are now writing to let you know what we found out.

Many of you told us just how good your school is and we agree. In fact, we think it is excellent. There were many things that impressed us, especially how well you behaved and how friendly and polite you are. We know that you make excellent progress and that you are proud of your achievements. We know that your school has achieved the Artsmark Gold Award and we were impressed by the very high standard of your art work. We also enjoyed your singing in assembly. Teaching in the school is excellent, although we have asked your teachers to think more carefully about the number of worksheets you use because there are very occasionally too many.

We loved hearing about the special days and weeks to extend your learning opportunities. We were particularly impressed with Year 4's residential trip and by the list of the many visitors you have in school to help you understand about your local community and the beliefs and customs of others. It must have been very exciting when Victoria Pendleton visited school with her gold medal. Mr Phelps told us that you all had a chance to hold it and have your photograph taken. Perhaps some of you will be inspired to a similar achievement!

Thank you again for being so kind to us, and we wish all of you every success in the future.

Best wishes

Marianne Harris

Lead inspector