

St Mary's RC Lower School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109630
Local Authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	324991
Inspection date	30 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Keith Sadler

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 aided
Age range of pupils	3–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	173
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 Richard Neal
Headteacher	Mrs Carol Snape
Date of previous school inspection	13 July 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Dunstable Road Caddington Luton Bedfordshire LU1 4BB
Telephone number	01582602420
Fax number	01582602420

Age group	3–9
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors who evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and the Early Years Foundation Stage. In addition, the following issues were investigated:

- how well the current Year 2 and 4 pupils are achieving
- how well the curriculum has been adapted to meet the needs of St Mary's pupils
- the overall quality of leadership and management of the school and how well teachers with responsibilities contribute.

Evidence was gathered from the school's analysis of pupils' progress, a scrutiny of samples of their work and observations of pupils in lessons. Discussions were held with staff, governors and pupils. In addition, the responses of 26 parents' questionnaires were analysed and their comments taken into account. 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

St Mary's is an average-sized lower school that is oversubscribed. Almost all the pupils are of White British heritage and there are a few from a wide range of other backgrounds. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average though increasing. Most of these pupils have specific learning or speech, language and communication difficulties. The school has an Early Years Foundation Stage unit for children from three years of age who attend the Nursery on a part-time basis, and who share the unit with the Reception class.

The school has gone through a turbulent period since the previous inspection. There have been many interim headteachers in the past two years. Currently, there is an interim headteacher who has been in post since early 2009 and she is to remain into the next school year. Governors have not yet been successful in attracting a permanent headteacher.

The school has gained a number of awards including Healthy Schools and Sports Activemark status.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The school has gone through a difficult period due to many changes in senior leadership in the past two years. It provides a satisfactory standard of education with some strengths. The governors, in collaboration with the Diocese and local authority, have worked tirelessly to find a long-term and settled solution for the school. The rate of improvement since the last inspection has not always been as rapid as intended but overall, improvement has been satisfactory. The interim headteacher has made an outstanding start and impact even though she has only been in post for a relatively short period of time. She has quickly gained the respect of pupils, staff, governors and parents. She has brought stability and vision. The staff welcome and embrace the clear structure and rigour she has introduced and together are determined to ensure pupils enjoy school and are successful in their learning. Her sensitive and excellent leadership is providing a firm foundation for the school to strengthen its provision and pupils' achievement.

Parents are unanimous in their support for the school and thoroughly appreciate the efforts of the staff and the care and attention that are given to their children. They rightly comment on the positive and supportive ethos of the school. Their views are summed up by the parent who wrote: 'My daughter skips into school. She loved the school instantly and I knew it was a good choice because the school combines caring and learning in a very safe environment.'

Pupils make satisfactory progress. Children's skills on entry are currently below expectations. However, in the past, their attainment has been similar to those typically found. This is the case for pupils in Years 1 to 4. Although standards in the past have been above average at the end of Year 2, particularly in writing, this is not now the case. Pupils' achievement is satisfactory and current standards at the end of Year 2 are broadly in line with the national average. Progress continues to be satisfactory in Years 3 and 4. On leaving at the end of Year 4 most pupils attain the national expectation. However, too few attain the higher level because there has been insufficient focus in the past on boosting these pupils' learning in English, mathematics and science.

Though achievement is satisfactory, there are signs that it is strengthening. This is because the interim headteacher has focused on improving arrangements to assess and track pupils' progress. Following staff training, the much improved accuracy of assessments enables teachers to be more secure in matching future work to pupils' learning needs. Even though the school's evaluation is that teaching and learning are satisfactory, these improvements now ensure that the quality of teaching and learning is currently good. However, even though pupils are making better progress in lessons, the impact of this over time is yet to be fully realised because the assessment arrangements are not fully embedded. Lessons are characterised by good relationships in which teachers manage pupils well, and the positive atmosphere in all classrooms aids learning. Teachers now invariably outline the purpose of lessons and recent work on clarifying the success criteria for lessons and units of work enables pupils to know what they have to do to succeed. However, not all teaching is as successful as the best because in some lessons teachers talk for too long and this slows the pace of learning.

Care and support for the happiness and well-being of all pupils are at the centre of school life. The pupils say that 'all the adults are kind and they look after us'. Academic guidance is good. Marking makes clear what pupils need to do to improve their work and pupils have a good awareness of their targets and levels. These overall outstanding levels of care and support lead to pupils' good personal development. Pupils enjoy school and learning, and, as one school

councillor said, 'We learn lots of new things every day.' Behaviour is excellent and they have highly positive attitudes to school. There are now excellent systems to improve attendance and their impact has been positive. However, attendance is only satisfactory because there is a small group of families whose children are persistently absent. Relationships are outstanding. As one Year 4 pupil said, 'We don't want anyone to be sad.' Pupils have a good understanding of healthy lifestyles and school councillors devised a questionnaire to survey other pupils about healthy eating in order to check what more they could do to encourage healthy living. Pupils also know about staying safe and they also feel safe because teachers are there to help them. Systems to safeguard health and safety are securely in place and all regulations are met in full.

There is a strong sense of community in the school and there has been an effective focus on strengthening the role of parents in their children's education. A wide range of classes for parents is planned and the school makes very good use of the local children's centre. As well as having a close relationship with local schools, including a good partnership with a special school, links with the local community are good. Pupils have recently made cakes to sell and also planted seeds and sold plants to raise money for educational visits. This strengthens the pupils' understanding of economic awareness. Pupils' sound levels of literacy and numeracy skills, when linked to their strong personal skills, enable them to be prepared appropriately for their move to middle schools.

The curriculum is of good quality and is enhanced by the well-established teaching of French as well as an after-school German club. Staff have adopted a thematic approach to learning which the pupils enjoy. The curriculum for literacy and numeracy now provides work that is sufficiently well matched to pupils' needs. Additional activities such as music and sports clubs ensure that the pupils have a good range of experiences. The provision for pupils who find learning difficult is good and work is carefully tailored to meet their needs. This results in these pupils making steady progress towards their learning targets.

The staff are deeply committed to the school and even though there have been many leadership changes, they work closely as a team and morale is good. They appreciate the interim headteacher's highly effective leadership and share her vision to rapidly improve the school still further. Nonetheless, some middle managers are only just getting to grips with the areas they lead. Governance continues to be good. Governors are directly involved in the strategic development of the school and are deeply concerned about any instability. Governors are determined to secure a clear, long-term future for the school and the improvements made recently demonstrate a satisfactory capacity for further improvement.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 3

The children enjoy their time in the Early Years Foundation Stage and develop and learn satisfactorily. Their skills are below those expected on entry and they make satisfactory progress in most areas. In consequence, when they leave the Reception Year, a minority achieve the expected goals in all six areas of learning. However, more children attain the goals in their personal, social and emotional development because these areas are promoted effectively. Recent developments in provision now give children more independence and more opportunities to follow their own interests and to be creative. Children are able to initiate their own play both inside and outside in a learning environment that has been carefully planned to cover different learning areas and stimulate them. A reading corner in a tent outside is one of the many different activities available, as well as woodwork, music, painting and real dough to practice bread making. The well-organised outside environment also gives lots of opportunities for physical

activity and skill development that are promoted well by the availability of large and small apparatus. This has resulted in children who are confident and at ease with their teachers and surroundings. Children's welfare is promoted well through healthy snacks such as fruit and they learn about food by growing vegetables in their own little garden.

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory. As well as opportunities for independent learning there are also sessions where children work with adults to extend and direct their learning. However, these sessions do not always have enough pace or challenge for the children, especially those who are more able. Leadership and management are satisfactory as the Early Years Foundation Stage leader is getting to grips with the requirements of the new framework and is increasingly checking provision and progress.

What the school should do to improve further

- Embed the current good arrangements for the assessment of pupils' learning to ensure that they are used consistently across all classrooms.
- Accelerate the progress of all pupils to raise standards and, in particular, the more able, in order to raise the number of these pupils gaining the higher level at the end of Year 4.
- Focus efforts to improve the attendance of the few families whose children are persistently absent from school.
- For governors, working in collaboration with the Diocese and local authority, to resolve the longer-term future of the school as quickly as possible.

A small proportion of 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.

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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?	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?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	3
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	3
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?	3
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	2
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3

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	3
The behaviour of learners	1
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 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

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	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2
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	2
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**

1 July 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Mary's Catholic Lower School, Caddington, LU1 4BB

Thank you for helping us when we visited your school to see you at work. You were very polite and helpful and we enjoyed talking with those of you whom we met. We were particularly impressed with Year 1's assembly for your parents and also how you had made cakes and grown plants from seeds to sell and make money for the school.

Your school gives you a satisfactory education. All the adults look after you exceptionally well and help you to feel safe and happy. Your school is warm and welcoming to you, your parents and also to visitors like us. Your teachers do a good job and they are working hard to make sure that the lessons that they plan for you are interesting and enjoyable. Your behaviour is excellent, you enjoy your lessons and playing with your friends. We know that you have had a number of headteachers in the past two years and we are delighted that Mrs Snape, your current interim headteacher, is doing such a first-rate job in leading your school. We understand why you are so confident that she will help to make your school better.

Your headteacher and staff are determined that your school is going to get better, and we have asked them to make sure the following things are done to help this.

- Make sure that your teachers assess your work carefully in all your classes.
- Help you all to make quicker progress, but particularly those of you that find learning easy. This will help you all to achieve even better and for more of you to gain the higher level at the end of Year 4.
- Make sure that fewer pupils are absent from the school.
- For your school governors, working with the Diocese and local authority, to make sure that there are not so many changes in your school's senior staff in the future.

You can continue to help by working hard and making sure that you always attend school. We hope that you enjoy your future learning.

Yours faithfully

Keith Sadler

Lead inspector