

# St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	110476
<b>Local Authority</b>	Milton Keynes
<b>Inspection number</b>	325154
<b>Inspection date</b>	24 March 2009
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Hugh Protherough

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.

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<b>Type of school</b>	Primary
<b>School category</b>	Voluntary aided
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	4–11
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number on roll</b>	
School (total)	288
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
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Mr John Mulligan
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mrs Monica Basham
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	6 March 2006
<b>Date of previous funded early education inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Date of previous childcare inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>School address</b>	St Mary's Avenue Bletchley Milton Keynes MK3 5DT
<b>Telephone number</b>	01908 373977

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<b>Age group</b>	4–11
<b>Inspection date</b>	24 March 2009
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**Fax number**

01908 649222

<b>Age group</b>	4-11
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## Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues:

- how good are current levels of achievement and, in particular, is the confidence of the lower-attaining readers and writers in Years 1 and 2 improving and their progress accelerating?
- how do teaching and the curriculum support high achievement and develop independent learning for pupils of all backgrounds and abilities?
- what has been the impact of senior leaders and managers on the quality of provision offered by newly qualified teachers and teaching assistants?

These issues were explored by gathering evidence from school assessment data, conversations with pupils, analysis of their work and lessons observations, and discussions with staff, governors and parents. 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 a larger than average primary school serving a community that is undergoing change. While the majority of pupils are White British, the proportion from other backgrounds is increasing steadily. These cover a wide range, the largest of which are Black African, Other White, Irish and Mixed White, and Black African. As a result, the proportion of pupils speaking English as an additional language has risen to slightly above the national average. Very few pupils are entitled to free school meals. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and special educational needs is below average and includes a range from specific to severe learning difficulties.

The school has gained numerous national and local awards. The most recent and significant awards for 2008 include: National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE) Challenge Award for Gifted and Talented provision, International Schools Award, Artsmark Gold Award.

A breakfast club, an after-school care project and a holiday play scheme operate on the school site. A building project to improve facilities for these activities is nearing completion.

## Key for inspection grades

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

## Overall effectiveness of the school

### Grade: 1

The school's evaluation claims that St Thomas Aquinas is a place that 'never stands still'. They are right. Despite being graded outstanding in all areas in the inspection of 2006, there is no complacency and the school has continued to surge forward in its quest to provide the best possible education for its pupils.

Pupils' achievements are outstanding on all fronts. Results in national tests have continued to be considerably above the national average for many years in English, mathematics and science. Around two thirds of Year 6 regularly exceeds the levels expected of 11-year-olds nationally. However, what makes this school so special is the considerable high achievement in so many other areas. The use of specialist expertise in subjects such as dance, art and music adds hugely to the quality of pupils' education. The progressive teaching of art techniques is evident throughout the school in the pupils' outstanding work in painting, sculpture and weaving. The sizeable school choir performs with brio and levels of intonation and enunciation far exceeding those usually found in primary schools. The flamenco group dance with passion and a strong sense of rhythm and technique, which were also observed in the school's current focus on Asian dance. The school also continues to enjoy considerable success in sport.

The snapshot of teaching taken during the inspection confirms the reasons for the school's outstanding performance. There is great consistency in terms of classroom preparation, thorough planning and the high expectations of what pupils are capable of achieving. Lessons move at a brisk pace. The pupils know what they are supposed to be learning and their individual targets. Teachers are adept at posing probing questions and encouraging pupils to explain their thinking. Helpful oral feedback is given in class and the marking of work is detailed and constructive. By Year 6, many pupils are engaging in written dialogue with their teacher.

In one Year 6 mathematics lesson, pupils of all abilities were observed making outstanding gains in their learning as they tackled a variety of complex mathematical problems. The more able pupils worked independently. They engaged in detailed consideration of the impact one mouldy tomato might have on a case of fruit over a period of days, and on the subsequent profit and loss of the greengrocer. They successfully collaborated to model a variety of intelligent scenarios and demonstrated mathematical expertise far exceeding that expected of 11-year-olds nationally. The school's recent work towards the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE) Award has raised awareness of the power of this type of activity, leading to further plans for the development of pupils' analytical skills across the school.

Pupils are proud of their school and thrive in an environment where they feel secure, happy and confident. Their behaviour is excellent and they welcome visitors in a friendly, open manner. They make the most of the many opportunities provided to eat healthily and keep fit. Their knowledge of the increasing variety of cultures represented at the school is excellent. Pupils have also benefited appreciably from the developing links with the Felix Rodriguez School in Spain. Teachers have visited each other's schools and pupils hold regular webcasts. A joint sculpture has been created and a Spanish courtyard created for children to relax in during the day. Everyone is learning Spanish, including the Reception children who write their shopping lists in the language.

Inspectors agree with the many parents, governors, staff and pupils who recognise the passionate commitment and influence of the headteacher in leading the school community. The effective way with which she develops leaders and managers at all levels ensures the school is well set

to sustain its high level of performance. In this school, the key driver for all management decisions is the individual child. The headteacher meets regularly with every teacher to review the progress of each pupil in their class in detail. Individual targets are set and, if a pupil's progress slackens, plans are put in place to ensure their needs are met. This detail is recorded on the class 'provision map' so that it is possible to see at a glance, alongside the record of their progress, how the needs of individual pupils are being met. Thus, the school guarantees that, whether a child is gifted and talented, speaks English as an additional language or has severe learning difficulties, their needs will be addressed.

Teachers are left in no doubt about their first priority and their performance management is rooted firmly in the extent to which they help the pupils in their charge to progress. They are supported in this by the strong teamwork of the entire staff team and the powerful induction processes provided for all who join the school. The three newly qualified teachers who arrived in September speak persuasively about the help and guidance they have received during their first year. The impact of this is plainly evident in the high quality of their classroom organisation which matches that of the established staff team, their effective teaching and the excellent progress of their pupils.

The school has developed a wealth of additional provision and expertise through its investment in a team of highly skilled and talented teaching assistants. These additional adults are extremely effective in supporting a range of pupil needs; from one-to-one support for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, to delivering Sounds-Write or teaching control technology. For instance, following concerns about a slight decline in the performance of pupils in Year 2 in reading and writing, a new programme has been set up to target pupils in Year 1 to ensure that more of them reach the higher levels. Short, engaging sessions enable pupils to improve their writing skills and focus successfully on key features such as extending sentences and using adjectives. As a result, many are already approaching the levels expected of seven-year-olds a year ahead of schedule.

## **Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage**

### **Grade: 1**

The profile of attainment of children entering Reception each September is mixed, but, taken overall, most arrive at school with levels of knowledge and skills in line with those expected nationally. In recent years, there has been a slight increase in the proportion of children scoring lower on their personal, social and emotional development. Even so, the children settle swiftly into the routines of the Reception class. This is because the staff team provides a wealth of exciting and motivating learning opportunities on a daily basis. Children are encouraged to learn independently by choosing activities and to persist until they complete the task. Clear rules, routines and high adult expectations ensure that children work and play together happily and learn respect and tolerance for each other.

Children make excellent progress across all the areas of learning because of the well-planned provision in both indoor and outdoor classrooms. They are fascinated by the growth of bulbs and seedlings in their garden and by the insects that live there. They make rapid gains in their physical dexterity, using wheeled vehicles to steer along roadways. The role-play corner is carefully set up as an estate agency. This encourages both imaginative play and the development of literacy skills as children write appointment cards and design property leaflets. Others use blocks to build houses and then practise measuring them.

In the midst of this busy and purposeful activity, the adults make a careful, focused assessment of each child. Under the excellent leadership of the class teacher, the information is shared and the progress of individuals carefully recorded and tracked. At the time of the inspection, all of the children were working comfortably within the early learning goals and a good proportion were exceeding them. This represents an excellent level of overall achievement.

### **What the school should do to improve further**

- Extend still further those exciting approaches to learning by which more able pupils are building their skills of logic, reason and debate.

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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 <sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup>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.

## Personal development and well-being

<b>How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?</b>	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	1
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

<b>How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?</b>	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

<b>How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?</b>	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**

20 April 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School, Milton Keynes, MK3 5DT

Thank you very much for the friendly way in which you welcomed the inspectors to your school. Several of you asked me, 'What's the best school you've ever been to?' I told you that this is a difficult question to answer because I've been to so many and schools are always changing. What I do know is that, just as you told me, yours continues to be an excellent one.

It's difficult to summarise on one page all the wonderful things I saw and heard during my day at St Thomas Aquinas, but I'll do my best to pick out the key reasons why the inspectors agree with your judgement.

First of all, the staff do a fantastic job and help you to set yourselves the highest standards. Your behaviour and attitudes to work are excellent. Your lessons are exciting and you all make rapid progress. You achieve very high standards, not just in English, mathematics and science, which are important; but also in subjects such as art, music, dance, and information and communications technology.

You take great pride in your work and achievements. It was so good to look at the work in your books and see that, not only do you present your work neatly, but you take care to read what your teachers say in their marking and take their advice. This is a really important skill to develop now and when you move on to secondary school and beyond. You show great maturity in your approach to work. Your capacity to work independently, as well as to tackle problems in groups, is outstanding. We saw some really demanding problem solving in Year 6 and we agree with the teachers that it would be good to ensure that everyone has the chance to develop this type of high-level thinking throughout the school.

The page is running out, but you need to know that we shall remember St Thomas Aquinas for a long time: your dancing, the choir, the focused hard work in lessons...and, in our long experience of inspection, certainly one of the best schools we've seen.

Yours faithfully

Hugh Protherough

Lead Inspector