

St Mary's Catholic Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	112353
Local Authority	Cumbria
Inspection number	325587
Inspection dates	4–5 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Steve Isherwood HMI

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	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	170
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 Helen Edwards
Headteacher	Mrs Susan Starkie
Date of previous school inspection	1 January 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	High Road Kells Whitehaven Cumbria CA28 9PG
Telephone number	01946 852685
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Age group	3–11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one additional inspector.

Description of the school

This is a smaller than average school situated in Whitehaven. The area served by the school is socially and economically disadvantaged. The vast majority of pupils are of White British heritage with a small number from minority ethnic groups. The proportion of pupils identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average, as is the number of pupils eligible for free school meals. When children start school many have skills that are below and sometimes well below those expected for their age, particularly in language and communication. The school has gained several awards including the Healthy Schools Standard and the Physical Education (PE) Activemark.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

'We are overjoyed at the start our child has had'. 'My child does not want to leave'. These comments, expressed by parents of children at opposite ends of the school and echoed overwhelmingly by others, help to explain why St Mary's is a good and rapidly improving school with several outstanding features. Pupils' achievements are good. They reach above average standards in their work and make exceptionally good progress in their personal development. This is evident in their cheerful demeanour, excellent behaviour and positive attitudes to learning. Pupils are in no doubt that they feel safe and secure in school and are happy and enthusiastic learners. This is because of good provision and exceptionally high standards of care and support for each child. High quality relationships are the hallmark of the school and reflect the warm, caring ethos that prevails. Pupils clearly love their school and greatly enjoy their learning. When asked to express their feelings about how they see things, they found it very difficult to think of any improvements that they would like to see. There was strong praise for the support they receive from staff and their enthusiasm for the wide range of opportunities that the school provides came shining through. As one child said, 'I like all the subjects because the teachers make learning fun'.

The school's promotion of community cohesion has improved and is now good. Opportunities that encourage insights into other religions and in pupils' awareness of other cultures in their own community and further afield are carefully planned and sensitively taught across the curriculum in ways that are meaningful through special themes and projects and in links with other schools. The school has a growing reputation in the local community and there are outstanding partnerships with parents, other schools and local agencies.

Pupils come on in leaps and bounds from the moment they enter the school. By the time they leave in Year 6 pupils reach above average standards in reading, mathematics and science. This represents good achievement considering their starting points. Nevertheless, the progress pupils make in writing is not as rapid as it is in reading. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well because information about their progress is used effectively and they receive very good additional support.

A significant factor in this good achievement is that teaching is good overall with some outstanding features. Furthermore, the curriculum is well planned with good opportunities for enrichment and enjoyment.

The success of the school is founded on good leadership and management spearheaded by the outstanding work of the headteacher. Senior leaders are very secure about the direction the school must take to improve further. They keep a close eye on performance and know the school exceptionally well. For example, the leadership team is well aware that the curriculum would be enhanced further with increased opportunities for pupils to practise and hone their writing skills in other subjects.

Considering the rapid improvements made since its last inspection and along with its other strengths, including accurate and highly effective self-evaluation, the school has excellent capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

The good provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage gives children a good start and ensures that they achieve well. When children enter the school, their skills and levels of learning vary but overall are below and sometimes well below those typical for their age, particularly in language and communication. They get off to a good start, settle quickly and achieve well. This is because of well planned support for groups and individual teaching which help children to develop their vocabulary and speaking skills well. For example, in the sand tray a child decided to hold a troll and gave his friend the goat, and asked, 'Who's been trip trapping on my bridge?', re-enacting the story he had heard earlier in the day. Language development is reinforced by good opportunities for imaginative role-play and by the systematic teaching of letters and sounds, which are helping children to make an early start on reading and spelling. Day-to-day assessment shows that children make good gains in their personal and social development and in their knowledge and understanding of the world. Children with learning difficulties are identified early and there are effective programmes in place to give them the support they need. The exciting environment and clear routines support the children's outstanding personal development and welfare, especially their independence and impeccable behaviour. There is a good balance between child-initiated and adult-led activities. Staff continually assess how well children are achieving and use the information to plan further challenges. This means that by the start of Year 1, most children are achieving the levels expected of them and have made good progress from their starting points. Parents are kept well informed and are encouraged to become actively involved in their children's learning. Leadership and management are good and staff work well together as a team.

What the school should do to improve further

- Accelerate pupils' progress further in writing.
- Increase opportunities for pupils to use their writing skills in different areas across the curriculum.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Standards tend to fluctuate year-on-year because of the small numbers of pupils involved and the different composition of each year group. Nevertheless, pupils' current work, as well as the test results for 2008, shows standards are above average and pupils' achievement is good.

When pupils start in Year 1 most are reaching the levels expected for their age and have made good progress from their below and sometimes well below average starting points. Pupils are now making good progress in Years 1 and 2 where provision is much improved. In 2008 standards dipped to below national averages in reading and mathematics and were well below in writing. This was because of disruptions to staffing, a high number of pupils leaving and joining the school and the fact that the pupils' abilities were less strong than in previous years. Provisional teacher assessments for this year indicate that increasing numbers of pupils are on track to reach their targets and that standards are rising. This is because improved teaching and learning are increasing the rate of progress pupils make in lessons.

Progress accelerates rapidly in Key Stage 2. Work in lessons and in pupils' books shows that pupils, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make good progress as they move through the school to Year 6. Standards in mathematics are above average, broadly

average in English and exceptionally high in science as reflected in the latest test results for 2008. A notable success was that in science and mathematics 96% and 88% of learners achieved the expected Level 4. While above average numbers of pupils made excellent progress to reach the higher Level 5 in mathematics and science, fewer did so in English.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral and social development, are outstanding and have a strong impact on their good progress. Their cultural development is good. Pupils are confident, caring and supportive of each other. They behave extremely well and have excellent attitudes to their work. They greatly enjoy their learning, as demonstrated by their enthusiasm for the wide range of opportunities that the school provides and by their improving attendance. The school is diligent in putting in place strategies to encourage pupils' attendance and improve their punctuality. For example, the learning mentor has worked successfully with parents and made good use of rewards to ensure that pupils attend school regularly. As a result, pupils have a good understanding of the link between attendance and their achievement and are aware of the importance of coming to school every day.

Pupils say they feel safe in school and speak highly of staff. They are confident that their voice will be heard and that any problems will be swiftly resolved. They develop a strong social conscience and have a clear sense of right and wrong. They are keen to take on extra responsibilities such as acting as play leaders, peer mentors or members of the active school council. Pupils recognise the needs of others through their strong community involvement and through their regular charitable donations to a children's hospice, Jeans for Genes and Children In Need.

Pupils have an excellent understanding of how to eat and live healthily through regular exercise and a balanced diet. They participate enthusiastically in an extensive range of physical activities as well as after-school clubs. Gaining the Activemark and Healthy Schools Award confirms the school's strong commitment to pupils' health and well-being.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good overall, with elements of outstanding practice, and enable pupils to make good progress in their work. All of the teaching seen during the inspection was at least good with some of it being even better and the school's records show that this is usually the case. A number of common strengths were seen in all lessons. Teachers make good use of interactive technology to enhance visual demonstrations and support pupils' learning. Very good relationships exist between adults and pupils. Teaching assistants provide an effective layer of extra support, particularly for those that find learning difficult. Teachers are enthusiastic, well prepared and have good subject knowledge. They are skilled in developing pupils' thinking through effective questioning that keeps pupils on their toes. All staff use praise well to celebrate pupils' achievements, to encourage them to try their best and to raise their self-esteem. In the very best lessons learning is fun and comes to life with an Aladdin's cave of stimulating activities that challenge and spur pupils to make excellent progress. In these lessons pupils are encouraged to investigate and direct their own learning with carefully crafted opportunities

for discussion and the sharing of ideas. For example, in an outstanding science lesson in Year 6, the atmosphere buzzed with excitement as pupils made excellent progress in using and applying their skills of inquiry by testing and investigating the friction of different floor surfaces.

Where teaching is less strong, on occasions too many worksheets are used and some activities lack pace and challenge to sustain the pupils' interest for long periods of time.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The good curriculum is well organised and serves all pupils equally and well. It meets all requirements and is very well focused on promoting the personal, social and health education of pupils. There is a clear emphasis on the development of key skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT). There are some well planned programmes of support, such as Early Literacy Support in Year 1, to ensure that pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress. All pupils benefit from enrichment opportunities such as visits and visitors to the school. Older pupils study French on a weekly basis. There is high take-up of the additional extra-curricular clubs and activities. These add considerable enjoyment to pupils' learning and enrich their experiences.

Senior leaders are not complacent and realise that despite recent improvements, the development of creative opportunities for pupils could go further by increasing the range of provision for learners to use their writing skills in a variety of different ways across the curriculum.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Care, guidance and support are outstanding. Excellent relationships ensure pupils enjoy their work and develop the confidence to make progress in all aspects of their school life. The school cares deeply for all its pupils, and all members of staff devote additional time and thought to ensure that every child is exceptionally well cared for.

They work effectively as a team and are very successful in ensuring that all pupils, including the most vulnerable, feel valued and are fully involved in all lessons and activities. Excellent communication with parents ensures that pupils settle quickly and are very well supported. Very strong links with local schools and other agencies underpin the strong arrangements to support pupils' smooth transition to secondary school. All required systems and checks are in place to safeguard the pupils' well-being.

Systems for monitoring pupils' academic progress are very effective and benefit from the outcomes of regular assessment. These give staff a clear view of how well pupils are achieving and how to plan additional support. Marking is good overall. There are some excellent examples where pupils are given clear guidance on how to improve their work and reach the next level. However, the quality of marking is variable and lacks consistency in some classes. Where teaching is strongest, marking is detailed with challenging targets set and pupils are very clear about how to improve their work.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The good quality of leadership and management at all levels stems from the outstanding lead and clear educational direction of the headteacher. She sets the tone and is passionate about maximising the potential of every child in a caring and structured environment where all pupils are fully included in what is offered and known as individuals. As a result, the school is highly inclusive and very effective in striving to improve pupils' life chances and in tackling discrimination. Staff are fully committed to removing barriers to learning and celebrating the achievements of all pupils. The headteacher is very well supported by an equally committed team of staff and governors who share her vision for improving the school. As a group, they actively seek out ways to improve further the current position, particularly in enhancing the quality of learning for all pupils and in promoting more creativity in the curriculum. The school has an excellent understanding of its strengths and potential areas for development. For example, senior leaders are well aware that the school improvement plan requires some fine-tuning to ensure an even greater focus on raising achievement and a sharper criteria for measuring success.

The governing body plays an effective role in shaping the school's direction and in holding it to account. Governors are well informed about the school's performance and are increasingly confident to act when necessary to support improvements or to question proposals.

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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?	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?	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?	1
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?	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	3
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	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?	1

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	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
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?	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	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**

8 June 2009

Dear Children

Inspection of St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Cumbria, CA28 9PG

Thank you for the friendly way in which you helped the inspection team when we visited your school recently. We really enjoyed chatting to you in lessons, in the playground and in the interview with the school council. You expressed your views very clearly and they were very helpful to us. This is what we found out.

You go to a good school that is such a happy and safe place to be. You make good progress in your work and are taught well. We were very pleased to see how well you behave at all times and how you help one another in class and around the school. We can see that the adults in school look after you really well and your parents told us this too.

You told us about all the exciting opportunities on offer and how your teachers help you to learn well by making your lessons interesting and often fun. We could see this for ourselves when those of you in Year 6 were investigating the friction of different floor surfaces in science and when those of you in Year 2 were learning to write a diary by using wow words and connectives in your sentences.

The headteacher and all the staff work very hard to make the school as good as it can be. Because of recent improvements and how well the headteacher and other staff know the school, we judge that the school is well placed to continue to improve. To help them we have asked if you can make faster progress in your writing and that more of your lessons give you opportunities to use your writing skills. You can help by continuing to work hard and by having the confidence to practise your writing in lots of different subjects.

Keep trying hard. We wish you and your families all the best for the future.

Yours faithfully

Steve Isherwood

Her Majesty's Inspector