

St Helen's Catholic Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115147
Local Authority	Southend-on-Sea
Inspection number	326134
Inspection dates	9–10 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Julie Winyard 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	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	205
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 Mary Glen
Headteacher	Mrs Elizabeth Mouchel
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	North Road Southend-on-sea Essex SS0 7AY
Telephone number	01702 343823
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Age group	4–11
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

St Helen's Catholic school is a slightly smaller than average-sized primary school. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and those identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities are both slightly below average. However, the proportion of pupils with a statement of special educational needs is above average. The school has a higher proportion of pupils who speak English in addition to the language spoken at home, than is found in similar schools nationally. The school's location is in an area of some social disadvantage. The school has been awarded the Activemark for sports, recognition as a Healthy School and the Financial Management Standard. The school has a breakfast club that is managed by the governing body.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

'At St Helen's, it is obvious that every child matters.' This parent's view is echoed by the vast majority of parents: St Helen's Catholic Primary School is a good school with some aspects that are outstanding. The good leadership of the headteacher and senior leadership team has ensured that good progress has been made on issues identified at the last inspection. Governors have worked hard to ensure that they provide a good balance between the support they give and the challenge they offer to ensure that the school continues to improve. Middle leaders are fully engaged in monitoring the quality of learning in the subjects they lead. All these factors show that the school has a good capacity to continue to improve.

Standards at the end of Key Stage 1 have varied over the last three years and last year, were below national expectations. This is due to several factors in this small school where the results of a few pupils can greatly skew results overall. The intake of pupils has changed, as increasing numbers of pupils have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and also more speak English in addition to the language they speak at home. Additionally, the school has growing numbers of pupils who join the school during, rather than at the beginning of, the key stage. Rigorous systems are in place to identify pupils that need additional support, effective intervention programmes meet pupils' individual needs and robust tracking systems ensure that support is effective. These measures ensure that pupils make good progress from their starting points. The picture in Key Stage 2 is similar. National data and the school's own tracking information show that pupils continue to make above-average progress, although standards are below average. The school is working very hard to raise pupils' attainment and recognises this as an area for improvement. A strength is that they identify initiatives that improve the pupils' learning. However, the new writing scheme and the teaching of philosophy, which are currently being implemented through the school, have not yet had sufficient time to raise pupils' attainment.

Teaching is consistently good, sometimes better, throughout the school. However, learning objectives are not always defined precisely and pupils are not always given a clear enough idea of how they can achieve required learning during the lesson. The curriculum is interesting so that pupils really enjoy learning. They are given good guidance, through teachers' oral feedback and written marking in their books, about how to make further improvements. They know and understand their learning targets and older pupils understand how to achieve the next level in their work.

The care pupils receive is outstanding, which results in their outstanding personal development and well-being. It is a delight to walk into the school and be greeted by polite and enthusiastic pupils, keen to share their work and ideas with you. One parent writes; 'The children understand what respect is, and how to show respect to others.' The very strong spiritual ethos within the school attracts families from other faith communities as well as Catholics. The school is fully inclusive and the work pupils undertake in philosophy lessons is enabling them to listen to each other and understand each other's point of view. As one pupil said, 'Philosophy helps us explain our ideas better and why we think things and then people can understand you better.'

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Children settle quickly into the routines of the classroom because staff know them well. Provision for children's welfare and care are good, hence they feel safe and make a good start to their education. They are excited, confident and become independent learners, as they select their own activities. For example, as part of a seaside theme one group made sandcastles, very carefully decorated with shells, and one child said: 'I am really, really happy with my sandcastle and am very proud of what I have made. I would like to go inside it!' The curriculum is well planned and provides good learning opportunities, for example, as the children made lists of what they wanted to take on holiday they were effectively taught letter sounds, thus helping them to develop early reading and writing skills. There is a wide range of worthwhile, stimulating activities on offer which show a good balance of those led by adults and those children can choose for themselves. Both indoor and outdoor areas are well-resourced. The children make full use of every learning opportunity and are encouraged to talk about what they are doing. However, children do not always stay purposefully engaged, resulting in some children moving too quickly from one activity to another.

Adults undertake regular observations and assessments of the children's progress, which are used to plan the next steps in learning. By the end of the Reception year most children, despite having below average attainment on entry, reach standards that are mainly at the level expected for their age. Transition arrangements from Reception to Year 1 are good, helping to ensure that children continue to learn successfully. Leadership of the Early Years Foundation Stage is good and the newly appointed co-ordinator of the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 has already had an impact on the quality of provision and learning.

What the school should do to improve further

- Continue to raise standards in Key Stage 2 by ensuring that the curricular initiatives in writing and reasoned thinking are securely embedded through the school.
- Ensure that all learning objectives are sharply defined and that pupils understand the steps to successful learning in every lesson.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Pupils enter Year 1 with attainment that varies from one year to the next. The current Reception class is mainly achieving in line with national expectations, however, this is not consistent in all years due to changes in intake and the increasing number of pupils entering the school at different times. Progress through Key Stage 1 is good and the school's records show that from their starting point each individual pupil's attainment improves well. Pupils also make good progress through Key Stage 2, although the majority do not attain nationally expected levels. Inspection evidence of a new initiative in writing being piloted by the school with Year 6 shows pupils' significant improvement between the start of the project last September and the school's evaluation in March of this year. Philosophy lessons, started last September, are also starting to have an impact across pupils' learning. This is because they are more confident in applying their reasoning skills in problem-solving activities of every kind.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Caring for others is central to the ethos of the school. Consequently pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. The school successfully promotes an impressive ethos of mutual respect between adults and pupils and this supports learning well. Pupils flourish in this environment where each individual is helped to play a full part within the school community. They readily accept responsibility as school councillors, 'guardian angels' for children in Reception, 'peacemakers' to support friends who may have a problem and young leaders. Opportunities for pupils to use their initiative and become independent learners are outstanding. There are plenty of chances for pupils to work together and they become good at doing this. They appreciate the help they receive from teachers and teaching assistants; they feel safe and comfortable at school. Pupils are extremely welcoming and polite. Their behaviour is outstanding. They are tremendously proud of their school, and say, 'learning is always fun'. Pupils have an excellent understanding of how to keep themselves safe and healthy, both through eating sensibly and taking exercise. Pupils really enjoy their lessons. Attendance is slightly above average and there are robust procedures in place to improve this further. Pupils make a significant contribution to the community by taking part in a range of projects that focus on the needs of others locally, nationally and globally. Pupils' well-developed literacy and numeracy skills, their ability to work together and their very positive attitudes to work and each other provide a good basis for them in the next stage of their learning and later life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Relationships are very good and this promotes enthusiasm for learning. In the best lessons, pupils think for themselves and are thoroughly challenged. Teaching makes effective use of interactive whiteboards and computers to catch and hold pupils' attention and extend their learning. Those who need extra help with their learning are well supported. Pupils are encouraged to take responsibility for organising and evaluating their own learning. Good opportunities are made for investigation and problem-solving, particularly in science and mathematics. Teachers work hard to create bright, colourful environments with clear displays that include useful learning prompts. Teachers maintain high expectations of pupils' performance and most insist that work is neatly presented. Work is marked carefully and often shows pupils what they need to do to reach the next steps in their learning. Lesson plans describe what pupils are expected to learn or precisely what new skills teachers expect pupils to master, but approaches to using learning objectives are not consistent.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum has improved since the last inspection. Very good links are made across subjects and these help pupils to see how skills learned in one subject can be transferred to another. Teachers are working hard to provide a wide range of exciting learning opportunities. Lessons in philosophy greatly develop pupils' thinking skills and encourage them to take more responsibility for their own learning. The school has plans to enrich the curriculum further. Provision for information and communication technology (ICT) is good. Pupils develop a high level of confidence and skill and use computers and other devices, such as digital cameras,

effectively. Provision for personal, social and health education is also good. Music provision is a particular strength, with an impressive orchestra and many opportunities for pupils to learn a musical instrument. The school modifies its curriculum effectively for pupils with learning difficulties so that they consistently experience success. An impressive range of clubs and visits, including a residential trip for older pupils, contributes significantly to pupils' enjoyment of learning and development of their social skills. Pupils benefit from good outdoor facilities encouraging them to participate in physical and environmental activities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Pupils feel happy and safe because the school provides a very caring and exceptionally supportive environment that contributes extremely well to their outstanding personal development. Incidents of bullying and racism are rare. Robust procedures are in place for safeguarding pupils and these comply with the latest government requirements. The school works hard to support families and secure pupils' regular attendance. Very effective links with a wide range of outside agencies support the needs of those who find it hard to learn. Skilled and highly trained teaching assistants enable individuals and groups of pupils who need extra support to progress well. Provision for pupils learning English as an additional language is outstanding: pupils are encouraged to celebrate their home language. A teaching assistant, who has been specifically trained, works closely with teachers to support pupils' language development. Procedures for assessing pupils' progress in English and mathematics are very well established, ensuring that teachers know pupils' capabilities and how to move their learning forward at a good rate.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management at all levels in the school, including the governors, is good because all are focused on raising standards and continuing to improve pupils' progress. The new and very robust tracking system is supporting this. It has enabled the school to set challenging targets for above-average progress. The data manager has implemented the system well and training is planned so that all teachers know how to monitor their pupils' progress. The school identifies its strengths and areas for development well and all staff and governors are involved in formulating the school development plan that sets out clear and accurate targets for improvement. Governors monitor the plan rigorously and ask challenging questions to ensure that focus is maintained. They make regular visits to the school, notably during the annual 'governor month' when every governor visits the school and tracks an agreed theme. The headteacher and senior leadership team monitor teaching and learning effectively. Subject leaders know how well pupils are achieving in their subjects and plans are in place to enable them to observe teaching in their subjects.

While community cohesion within the school and parish community is outstanding, which is reflected in the excellent care the pupils receive, the school is in the early stages of ensuring that pupils' understanding of the wider United Kingdom and global communities is extended as part of current, planned curricular developments. Therefore community cohesion, overall, is good. There are good links with other local schools and good liaison with the local Catholic and other high schools to ensure pupils' effective and smooth transition.

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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	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	3
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	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	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	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	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**

11 June 2009

Dear Pupils,

Inspection of St Helen's Catholic Primary School, Southend-on-Sea, SS0 7AY

Thank you very much for the warm welcome you gave us when we visited your school. We were very impressed with your excellent behaviour and enthusiasm about your school and about learning. You try very hard to do your best in your lessons and make good progress in your work because of this. You know your learning targets, which helps you to improve your work. We give a special 'thank you' to the groups of pupils, including the school council, who came to talk with us.

We think St Helen's is a good school and in some ways it is outstanding. You are all very well cared for by the staff and you have great confidence in your teachers and support assistants. You all have an excellent understanding of how to be healthy and you work very well together in lessons. For example, in the philosophy lessons we observed you listened carefully to your partner's ideas and the ideas of the rest of the class really well. You were able to explain your thinking and why you agreed or disagreed with each other about the topic you were discussing.

There is always something that can be done to improve learning even more. Your school has chosen two very good ways to help you to make good progress with your work, the new writing project and the introduction of philosophy. We have asked your school to ensure that these lessons are taught well throughout the school.

Your teachers usually explain what you are learning about in your lessons but sometimes they add too many ideas. We have asked them to keep learning objectives easy to understand and to ensure that you have clear steps to successful learning in every lesson.

I would like to wish you every success for your future lives. It was lovely to meet you all.

Yours faithfully

Julie Winyard

Her Majesty's Inspector