

St Thomas More Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117479
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326622
Inspection date	13 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Mike Best

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)	223
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 Gerard McKenna
Headteacher	Mrs Lisa Barton
Date of previous school inspection	19 January 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Greenway Berkhamsted Hertfordshire HP4 3LF
Telephone number	01442 385060
Fax number	01442 385061

Age group	3–11
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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:

- pupils' progress as they move through the school
- pupils' awareness of how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve their work
- the effectiveness of the governing body in fulfilling its responsibility to hold the school to account.

Inspectors gathered evidence from:

- lesson observations,
- scrutiny of pupils' work, teachers' planning and records
- discussions with pupils, parents, governors, the headteacher and staff
- scrutiny of school policies and documentation
- analysis of parents' responses to the inspection questionnaire.

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 its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

The school serves Catholic parishes in Berkhamsted, Tring and the surrounding rural areas. The number on roll is average compared with other primary schools. Although pupil mobility is average overall, it is often concentrated in particular year groups due to the different ages of transfer in other schools in the locality. The school holds the Healthy Schools and Activemark awards.

When they start in the Nursery, children's skills and experiences are similar to those expected for their age. Although the proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well below average, the proportion of pupils with statements outlining their special education needs is similar to that found in schools nationally. The proportions of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those having English as an additional language are well below the national average. The after-school club which takes place on the school premises is not managed by the governing body. It was inspected separately at the same time as the school.

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 outstanding Catholic primary school. When they start in the Nursery, children's skills and experiences are similar to those expected for their age. The excellent progress they make in the EYFS is sustained as they move through the school, with standards at the end of Year 6 consistently high in English, mathematics and science. This outstanding achievement is the result of consistently high quality teaching and pupils' exceptionally strong appetite and enthusiasm for learning. The school has made impressive progress since its previous inspection and has an excellent capacity for further improvement.

Standards in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Year 2 are well above national averages. The proportions of boys and girls gaining the higher Level 3 in each subject have risen since the previous inspection and were exceptionally high in 2008. From already high starting points, the school has successfully improved pupils' achievement by the end of Year 6, where standards are exceptionally high. In the 2008 statutory tests, every Year 6 pupil reached the nationally expected Level 4 in English, mathematics and science and the proportions of pupils gaining the higher Level 5 in each of these subjects were significantly higher than the national averages. Pupils met and exceeded the already challenging targets set for them. Throughout the school, boys do at least as well as girls. Pupils who have difficulties in learning, particularly in reading and writing, are promptly identified and plans put in place to support them; as a result, they make excellent progress. Similarly, the school provides well-focused support for pupils learning English as an additional language, enabling them to achieve high standards in their work.

A particular strength of the outstanding quality of the teaching and learning in the school is the way in which teachers, ably supported by teaching assistants, plan for pupils' differing needs. Well-developed systems accurately track what individual pupils know and can do and enable teachers to plan very precisely the next steps in learning. Throughout the school, teaching focuses systematically on developing pupils' skills and provides imaginative and interesting opportunities for them to practise, improve and apply these, and previously acquired knowledge, in problem-solving situations. This approach is particularly effective in challenging the more able pupils. They say they appreciate the opportunity to plan and develop their work, especially their extended pieces of writing, many of which are of an exceptionally high standard. Staff maintain a register of pupils identified as gifted and talented and provide specific opportunities for them, both within the school and in conjunction with partner providers. Pupils confidently work together in groups or individually, seeking help when needed and answering challenging questions thoughtfully and accurately. Pupils have an excellent understanding of how they need to improve their work. This is because they are highly familiar with their targets and benefit from the constructive comments made by staff when checking their work.

The school provides pupils with an outstanding range of curricular and other activities. Building on its skills-based approach, teachers are successfully developing links between subjects. For example, in Year 2, pupils were using literacy skills to compile a glossary of scientific terms to support their work on forces. Visits and visitors make a valuable contribution to pupils' learning and their personal development is provided for exceedingly well through a very comprehensive programme. Specialist teaching supports the development of music and a popular range of extra-curricular sporting activities.

The outstanding quality of the school's provision for pupils care, guidance and support reflects in the excellent standard of pupils' personal development. The highly effective provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development underpins their daily life and work in school. Behaviour in lessons and around the school is of a consistently high standard and pupils support each other extremely well. Staff deal sensitively with pupils who have behavioural difficulties, successfully anticipating when extra support and guidance is needed. Arrangement for safeguarding pupils meet requirements and there are excellent links with outside agencies. Pupils thoroughly enjoy school and their attendance is well above the national average. Pupils develop an excellent understanding of working together for the school and wider communities. They show a high level of maturity and respect for the feelings, needs and well-being of others. The school council is particularly effective in developing pupils' involvement in decision-making and in promoting pupils' awareness and contribution to the school, local and wider world communities. Pupils are very conscious of keeping healthy and have a well-developed understanding of staying safe. The 'special friend' scheme, where Year 6 pupils team up with a member of the Reception class, is highly valued by parents and pupils alike. By achieving high standards in both their academic and personal development, they are extremely well prepared for the next stage of their education and their lives as young adults.

The leadership and management of the school are outstanding. The headteacher gives strong and decisive direction to the school, robustly focused on providing pupils with a high quality education. She is exceedingly well supported by a hardworking staff team who provide excellent leadership in their areas of responsibility and, as one, diligently promote the school's ethos and values. The school's well-developed strategy for promoting community cohesion is evident in the strength and harmony of its own school community and in the way it uses the partnerships it has in the locality, nationally and in the Gambia they bring a strong global dimension to pupils learning. The school enjoys strong support from parents. In drawing its pupils from a wide geographical area, staff and governors are aware that a significant proportion of parents do not visit the school on a regular basis. Recent initiatives have extended the range of opportunities for parents to receive information and to discuss their children's progress, and the school is committed to developing this provision further. School self-evaluation is highly perceptive and systems for monitoring and evaluating different aspects of the school's work are robust. The school sets itself challenging targets and plans thoroughly to achieve these. Members of the governing body have an excellent understanding of the school's strengths and areas where improvements can be made, and are rigorous in calling the school to account.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 1

Children starting in the Nursery demonstrate a wide range of skills and experiences. They quickly settle into the daily routines and thrive on the outstanding provision staff make for their learning and welfare. Children make excellent progress and by the end of the EYFS, nearly all meet and many exceed the expected levels in each of the areas of learning. The calm and purposeful atmosphere throughout the EYFS is the result of exceptionally thorough planning and the inspired use of quality learning resources that enable learning to be very closely matched to children's needs. Staff provide high quality support for children at risk of falling behind and for those who are able to move forward at faster rates.

Children's personal development and well-being are outstanding. They play happily with adults, in small groups or on their own, demonstrating confidence and independence in making choices and developing their ideas. The strong emphasis on developing children's skills through a rich

and varied range of activities is instrumental in children's excellent progress in all areas of learning. The transition from the Nursery to the Reception class builds seamlessly on children's skills and experiences, introducing more formal opportunities for learning while maintaining an excellent balance of play activities. The provision for outdoor learning in the Nursery is outstanding; in the Reception class, the outdoor area has recently been extended and plans are in hand to develop its facilities. The management of the EYFS is excellent, with highly effective systems for monitoring and tracking children's progress.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the facilities for outdoor education in the Reception class.
- Explore further ways of developing communication with parents.

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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	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

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**

14 January 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Thomas More Catholic Primary School, Berkhamsted, HP4 3LF

Thank you very much for making us so welcome when we visited your school earlier this week. We really enjoyed looking at your work with you and hearing from you how much you enjoy school. We were very impressed with the standard of your work and how well you make progress. We congratulate you on your excellent behaviour, and how well you care and look out for each other. We were particularly interested in the links you have with a school in the Gambia and how you support a number of charities here and abroad.

You are absolutely right to be proud of your school because it is outstanding. Your teachers work very hard to make sure that the work they give you is not only interesting but builds on what you already know and can do. This means you can move on quickly and confidently to the next steps in your learning. You know what you need to do to improve your work and the targets you are aiming for. We were impressed by the way you all settled down to your work, helping each other and asking for help when needed but, above all, trying to do your best.

Mrs Barton and the staff run the school exceedingly well and the governors are really involved in making sure that everything runs as smoothly as possible. We have asked them to do two things to make the school even better. The first is to improve the outside area in the Reception class so that you can spend more time out there learning during lessons. The second is to explore the best ways of letting your parents have information. Many of you live a long way from the school and your parents are not able to visit the school easily. You can help by making sure that you pass on newsletters and other information, and by regularly telling them about all the different things that you are doing at school.

Keep working hard and enjoying school.

Yours truly

Mike Best

Lead inspector