

St Nicolas Church of England Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123166
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	327860
Inspection date	13 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Mike Thompson

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 controlled
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	433
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 R Dix
Headteacher	Mr R Furniss
Date of previous school inspection	18 October 2005
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Boxhill Walk Abingdon OX14 1HB
Telephone number	01235 520456
Fax number	01235 530323

Age group	4–11
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Introduction

Two Additional Inspectors carried out this inspection. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues.

- To what extent is the school able to demonstrate the good progress it claims that pupils make?
- How effective are the initiatives designed to improve standards in writing and mathematics?
- How effective is the academic guidance given to pupils?

In addition, the inspectors investigated the concerns expressed by a small minority of parents that communications with the school and pupils' behaviour could be improved.

The inspectors gathered evidence from performance data, observations of teaching, the work produced by pupils, and observations of the pupils at play and at lunch. Parents' questionnaires and discussions with pupils, representatives of the governing body and some members of staff also contributed to the judgements. The inspectors did not investigate other aspects of the school's work in detail. Where the inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

This is a large primary school, located near to the centre of Abingdon. Almost all of its pupils are of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is well below average. The proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also well below average. Most of these have moderate learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social problems. The school has the Activemark accreditation for its commitment to physical education and sport, and the national Healthy School award.

The school's provision for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) comprises two Reception classes. In addition, there is a Pre-School and Playgroup which operates from a building within the school grounds. This is not managed by the school and is the subject of a separate inspection report.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Nicolas Primary is a good and improving school. Comments such as 'The staff are dynamic and forward thinking, and the school is managed well' and 'the school provides a safe, nurturing environment with lots of stimulating activities' typify the many positive views expressed by parents. They are right. Securely underpinning all of the school's work is good-quality teaching, a good curriculum and excellent day-to-day care.

This is a good school because it is effective in ensuring that pupils achieve well. It moves children from broadly average starting points when they join the Reception classes to attain standards that are invariably above and often well above the national averages in English, mathematics and science by the end of Year 6. It does this through good teaching that enables the pupils to make good progress. The school is good at quickly identifying the specific needs and talents of its pupils. In the case of those who are more able, additional challenge is provided, for example in writing, to help extend pupils' skills through work in small groups. Where pupils have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, skilled teaching assistants help ensure that they receive effective help in lessons and play a full part in class activities.

The school acknowledges some previous weaknesses in assessing pupils' attainment. These adversely affected the progress made by pupils. Over the past few years procedures have been strengthened and assessments are now much more reliable. The robust tracking systems now in place provide clear evidence of the good progress made by pupils.

The school is constantly seeking ways to improve, and is good at evaluating its own effectiveness to inform its actions. In recent years it has identified the need to improve pupils' skills in mathematics, particularly in calculation, and in writing. It has implemented a wide range of measures, including focused monitoring of teaching and learning, which are having a beneficial impact. The implementation of regular, structured teaching of letter sounds (phonics), for example, is improving pupils' confidence and skills as writers in Key Stage 1. In mathematics, the many successful strategies include the provision of workshops for parents and the development of a useful booklet about calculation to help parents support their children's homework more effectively.

A particularly noteworthy feature of the school is the pupils' outstanding personal development and well-being. The school places a strong emphasis on ensuring that pupils have a clear understanding of the importance of keeping safe and living healthy lives. Its Healthy School status and Activemark accreditation recognise the excellent impact of its work in promoting sensible eating habits and physical activity.

Pupils' outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development underpin all aspects of school life. Pupils work and play together very well. They told inspectors that they feel safe at school and that instances of bullying are generally rare. The school's consistently high attendance rate reflects pupils' real enthusiasm for all aspects of school life. When asked to identify what they like best about school, pupils listed a wide range of choices. The school is particularly good at promoting pupils' social awareness, and pupils make an excellent contribution to the community. Within school, the oldest pupils appreciate the responsibility of helping younger ones. At lunchtime, for example, pupils in Year 6 help with the service of meals by running the 'salad bar' or providing drinking water. A number of charities regularly benefit from the pupils' excellent fund-raising efforts.

While a large majority of parents have overwhelmingly positive views about the school, there is a small but significant minority which has concerns about quality of the school's dialogue with them and another group which is concerned about standards of behaviour. The inspectors investigated both of these areas thoroughly. In most cases the school has been very successful in developing an effective partnership with parents. The school's communication with parents is generally better than is often found, and staff fully subscribe to the school's 'open door' policy. A particularly noteworthy feature is the home learning project for Year 6, which involves fortnightly telephone conversations about pupils' progress and attitudes. Nonetheless, in light of the views expressed, the school recognises that more needs to be done to further improve its partnership with parents by ensuring that they feel that their views are fully considered. With regard to behaviour, the school acknowledges that there are sometimes instances in which pupils with identified emotional and behavioural needs are unable to cope with the demands of working cooperatively with others. The pupils confirm this, but sensibly view the outbursts by these pupils as 'part of growing up'. Overall, behaviour is good. In closely supervised situations, such as when pupils enter or leave the hall for assembly, it is impeccable.

Pupils benefit greatly from the many interesting and exciting activities, which are enriched through a wide range of extra-curricular clubs and visits to places of interest. When asked about their favourite aspects of school, a number of pupils said how much they enjoyed their work, particularly the 'focus' weeks which promote more creative activities. The school is rightly proud of its provision in music, where the pupils benefit from specialist teaching, including instrumental tuition in violin or cello for all pupils in Year 3. The standard of singing, heard in assembly, is high. The headteacher is building on the well-established systems for managing the school and is working on an initiative to further improve the quality of information on which monitoring depends. This is the development of a better system for recording the teachers' ongoing assessments of their pupils' achievements. Although only recently introduced, the system provides much clearer information about the progress being made by each individual. At present, its impact is yet to be seen in terms of more focused interventions where pupils are found to be underachieving.

Teachers know their pupils well and relate well to them. In lessons the good dialogue between teachers and their pupils, based on the teachers' skills in questioning, often makes a significant difference to the quality of learning. Teachers' assessments of their pupils' attainment are accurate; consequently they are good at pitching work to reflect different levels of ability. Pupils' eagerness to learn and their love of being at school are key factors in the good progress they make. They enjoy challenge, and the good teaching that they receive generally ensures that they are not disappointed. On some occasions teachers do not provide clear enough instructions for their pupils or do not manage time well enough; consequently lessons lose pace and direction and learning slows.

The academic guidance provided for pupils is inconsistent. Teachers generally mark pupils' work thoroughly and provide useful pointers as to what needs to be improved. However, corrections are not always used well enough as a tool for improvement. All pupils have targets to achieve in literacy and numeracy, but the effectiveness of systems for setting and reviewing these targets vary considerably.

The school takes excellent care of its pupils because procedures are diligent and thorough. Proper security checks are made of all adults who come in frequent contact with pupils. Behaviour is closely monitored and any persistent or serious misbehaviour is managed well. Good use is made of the expertise of outside agencies.

The reason for the school's success is the good quality of leadership at all levels. In particular, the headteacher gives clear direction for the work of the school and receives good support from the committed and highly professional staff and governors. Together they ensure that the school constantly look for ways to improve even more. The school shows a commitment to promoting cohesion within and outside the school community. The accuracy of the school's self-evaluation, together with the ambition shown to improve academic standards while providing pupils with a broad, well-rounded education is a clear indication of its good capacity to improve.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Children in the EYFS make good progress to reach levels that are above average, because activities are well planned and develop their interests and skills. Children are very well cared for and are extremely well behaved. They are encouraged to be kind and to help each other. They learn to take turns and accept responsibility when sharing equipment and resources in a happy and stimulating environment. They are praised and rewarded, which further boosts their self-esteem. This, combined with good teaching, which employs very effective systems for planning and assessment, enables children to make good progress, particularly in their personal development. Activities are well balanced between those chosen by the children and those which are led by adults. The recently adopted 'key person' system is working well in ensuring that children's individual learning is closely monitored and supported. Leadership and management are good, and have been responsible for securing good improvements. There is a clear view of how to improve the provision and everyone's contribution is valued. Some developments, including the establishment of a close working partnership between school and the pre-school staff, are yet to impact fully on provision.

What the school should do to improve further

- Provide pupils with clearer direction by ensuring greater consistency in the practice of setting and reviewing targets for them to achieve.
- Build on the good systems already in place to improve the partnership 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?	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?	2
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?	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?	1
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	1
The behaviour of learners	2
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?	2

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**

26 January 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Nicolas Church of England Primary School, Abingdon, OX14 1HB

On behalf of the inspectors, I would like to thank you for helping us so much when we came to find out how well you are getting on. We particularly enjoyed visiting your lessons and talking to some of you.

I agree with your parents that you go to a good school.

There is so much I like about your school that I cannot mention everything, so here is a list of what I think are the most important things.

- You make good progress. By the time you leave at the end of Year 6, you are better at English, mathematics and science than pupils in many other schools. You should be very proud of all of this.
- You get on well with each other and your behaviour is usually good.
- You know a lot about how to be healthy and safe.
- You learn well in lessons because they are usually good.
- Your teachers are good at planning lots of interesting things for you to do.
- All of the adults in your school make sure that you are well looked after.
- The people who help run your school, such as your headteacher, do a good job in making sure that you get a good education.

Even in a good school like yours there is always something that could be better. Your headteacher agrees, and wants your school to be really excellent. To do this, he has already made lots of improvements. The next thing that the school needs to do is to make your individual targets clearer and make sure that everyone works towards their targets in the same way. This will mean that you have to put in even more effort. I am sure that you are ready for the challenge!

The school is good at making sure that your parents know what you are doing and how to help you, but it also realises that some of your parents do not think that their views are always considered. I have asked your headteacher and governors to see what they can do to improve on this.

I am sure that you will continue to have great success in the future.

Yours faithfully

Mike Thompson

Lead Inspector