

St Helen's Church of England Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117462
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	339010
Inspection dates	10–11 June 2010
Reporting inspector	Paul Canham

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	257
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Peter Barnes
Headteacher	Andrew Emeny
Date of previous school inspection	9 November 2006
School address	Brewhouse Hill Wheathampstead St Albans
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by three additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 18 lessons, observed 11 teachers and held meetings with governors, staff, parents and a group of pupils, and talked with pupils in lessons. They observed the school's work and looked at a range of documentation, including assessment and attendance information, lesson plans, safeguarding arrangements, school development planning, governing body minutes and pupils' work. Inspectors also scrutinised the 150 questionnaires received from parents, as well as those from staff and a sample of pupils.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- the extent to which the school is accelerating achievement, particularly for boys and the most able pupils
- how successfully the school promotes pupils' experience and appreciation of cultures and faiths other than their own in other countries
- the influence of the leadership team, and that of the governing body, on the school's direction and performance.

Information about the school

This is an average sized primary school that serves the village of Wheathampstead and others nearby. The very large majority of pupils are from families of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is below average. Some pupils in Years 1 to 4 are taught in classes which contain more than one age group. The school has achieved National Healthy Schools status, Activemark and the Travel Plan gold award.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

This is an outstanding school. Staff, pupils and parents are proud of their school and the education it provides. It successfully nurtures an ethos of self-esteem and respect for others, which are central to the school's harmonious learning community. The very caring and supportive environment provides a secure foundation for the school's work. Consequently, pupils have outstanding attitudes to school and relish opportunities to take on additional responsibilities. This picture is reflected in the questionnaires completed by pupils where they all indicated that they really enjoy school. Pupils work exceptionally well in pairs and independently. These very strong features have a positive influence on pupils' outstanding progress, high levels of attainment, and excellent personal development. Parents and carers are overwhelmingly supportive of the school. One parent's comment sums up the views of others: 'I am delighted with the quality of teaching and care at St Helens. My family and I have returned after two years away and the school is actually better than I remember, if that is possible!'

With close support from staff, the headteacher has developed a school that is totally committed to gaining the best provision and outcomes for pupils and their families. Together with close support from well-informed governors, school leaders have an accurate understanding of where the school is now and of the improvements needed. These strengths provide a solid platform for learning and show that the school is extremely well placed to move forward. The school knows it must do more to help pupils develop a better understanding of people's backgrounds and communities globally.

Subjects are frequently linked in innovative ways and detailed assessment procedures support successful teaching, which motivates and challenges pupils with interesting activities. Good, and sometimes outstanding, teaching and the pupils' eagerness to become fully involved, result in exceptionally good progress. Pupils benefit from well-paced lessons where they enjoy using their own ideas and working together. Typically, activities are well matched to pupils' prior attainment. Intervention work, including closely-tailored support for individual pupils, successfully makes up for lost ground in learning for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Consequently, work in lessons reflects the high attainment levels seen in the school's national test results and assessments over several years for pupils in Years 2 and 6. Pupils of minority ethnic heritage and boys and girls achieve equally well.

Very popular clubs and after-school activities provide pupils with many opportunities to develop interests and stimulate their creative and performance skills.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

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- Extend the school's strategy for community cohesion by creating more opportunities for pupils to appreciate and value people from a wide variety of backgrounds and communities globally.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

The pupils' enjoyment of learning stands out, along with their eagerness to become fully involved in a range of engaging activities, for example, in English, mathematics and physical education. In assembly, pupils sing enthusiastically, tunefully and with much self assurance. Their extremely positive attitudes are typical of lessons and indicate the outstanding progress which they make. As a result, attainment is high. In English, pupils show a very good understanding of how to identify the key words from different texts and make succinct notes. In mathematics, pupils can explain, with confidence, the reasons behind their answers and the methods they used. Pupils show a great deal of independence and self-organisation when working in pairs and small groups. They are highly supportive of each other and in mathematics, for example, show great pride in getting the tasks right.

Children join Reception with expected levels of attainment. From this point, they make outstanding progress and reach high attainment levels by the end of Year 6, as indicated by the results of national tests and assessments over recent years. A dip in attainment in 2008 was due to the larger than usual proportions of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who joined the school part way through their education. The school exceeded its challenging but realistic targets for both English and mathematics in 2009. Pupils in Year 2 consistently reach high levels of attainment, as reflected in the assessments over the past three years. Pupils are on track to reach similar levels this year. There are no significant differences between the achievement of different groups of pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Pupils say they like coming to school and flourish in the highly supportive and caring community. Respect and consideration for each other are at the heart of the school's work. These strong characteristics pervade the impeccable behaviour and caring approach taken by pupils who get on extremely well with each other. Pupils are happy, confident and willingly take on responsibility, including acting as monitors. Pupils' thoughtful behaviour is an outstanding factor in their successful learning. All these qualities contribute to the harmonious school community and make it one in which, 'Teachers are very friendly and lessons are fun,' as several pupils reported. Despite a relative shortcoming in pupils' understanding of people's backgrounds and communities in other parts of the world, such is the strength of other aspects that spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. The school council provides very good opportunities for pupils to represent the views of others and develop leadership qualities. Helped by the school's innovative projects to encourage enterprise, such as those that involve creating and marketing a business project, pupils' personal skills are developing into important qualities for future life. Pupils show extremely good levels of understanding about personal safety in and out of school.

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These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	1
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	1
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	1
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	1
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

Consistently good, and sometimes outstanding, teaching is at the core of the school's high standards. Key strengths include detailed planning, engaging activities and a lively pace. Precise questioning is also used to probe pupils' understanding and capture their interest. Topics are used particularly well to link subjects, and reinforce and develop key skills. There is an occasional lack of challenge for the most able particularly at the beginning of lessons. Information from assessment is sometimes not used well enough to give pupils appropriately pitched tasks right at the start of lessons to ensure more able pupils move on swiftly. Timely reminders draw out misunderstandings and quickly guide pupils back on the right course. Teaching assistants give well-informed and close support to individuals.

The wide range of high quality displays gives an insight into the richness and diversity of the curriculum. The innovative curriculum provides a carefully constructed balance between basic skills in literacy and numeracy and the development of pupils' performance and creative skills in subjects such as physical education, music and art. The teaching of French adds a further positive dimension. The curriculum also takes

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

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very good account of the wide range of ability and every opportunity is taken to enhance learning by linking different subjects. The school has given additional attention to English, and particularly writing for boys, to ensure that their rate of progress is accelerated throughout the school. The curriculum is underpinned by the very good use of information and communication technology, which enhances learning and gives pupils access to a range of resources and opportunities for independent research. Pupils' experiences are further enriched by numerous trips locally and beyond, including a residential trip to Wales, and by a very well planned programme for personal, social and health education.

Care, guidance and support are outstanding and have a clear impact on improving outcomes for pupils. The exceptional pastoral care is recognised and valued by parents and carers. The close attention to pupils' health and well-being is reflected in the many opportunities for physical activity and the provision of healthy school meals.

Individualised programmes of support are successfully compiled for pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable, covering a number of personal and learning needs. These programmes are supplemented by rigorous tracking of each pupil's progress. Very close liaison with parents and outside agencies and closely tailored individual attention enables those with the greatest needs to gain confidence and self-esteem and to be very successful learners.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

Extremely effective leadership and management have ensured outstanding outcomes for individuals and groups of learners. With very strong support from knowledgeable governors, the headteacher has established a school that demonstrates a commitment to developing each pupil's self-esteem and maintaining high standards.

Committed staff readily take on areas of responsibility and share in the school's collective leadership. They feel very well supported and their high expectations of where they want their pupils to be demonstrate a strong capacity for moving on.

The school promotes equality and tackles any form of discrimination extremely well. The school's monitoring procedures are very effective in identifying the needs of pupils and, as a result, all groups of pupils make outstanding progress. Staff and governors have a very clear and accurate view of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Governors work very closely with the school and share in its rigorous monitoring and

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evaluation. They have exceptionally good links to all aspects of the school's work. Very detailed and well-organised procedures ensure that safeguarding arrangements are carefully followed. The school uses well embedded and reliable quality assurance and risk assessment systems.

The school's work in partnership with other organisations is excellent. Detailed planning shows a systematic approach to developing and sustaining links and partnerships with other schools nearby and outside agencies. The school has an excellent understanding of local needs, although it knows it must do more to help pupils gain a better understanding of people's backgrounds and communities in other parts of the world. Parents are given a wide range of opportunities to give their views on the school and benefit from regular newsletters, electronic mail and access to their own website.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Early Years Foundation Stage

Children's needs are identified early and excellent leadership and management make certain that detailed planning takes very good account of their starting points. Consequently, well-planned topics ensure all areas of learning are covered with a particular focus on reading, speaking, listening, writing, and number skills. Adults respond skilfully and exceptionally good support is given to children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Children listen attentively, play together very well, and thoroughly enjoy participating in a wide range of stimulating activities. Children are very keen to explore activities and find things out for themselves while chattering to each other. New experiences, both indoors and outdoors, captivate and fully engage children so they make exceptionally good progress in all areas of learning.

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Working closely with parents, staff give closely targeted support to both teacher-initiated activities and those which children choose for themselves. Children are nurtured from the very start. As a result, they settle quickly, are eager to learn and are very well prepared for entry to Year 1.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The effectiveness of leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1

Views of parents and carers

The response rate was higher than usual and almost all questionnaires were positive. Some of the few written comments expressed considerable satisfaction with the school. These included positive remarks about the caring and supportive environment and the quality of teaching.

A very small minority of parents and carers recorded reservations over a very small number of issues, including the way the school takes account of concerns and complaints. These reservations were not reflected in the very large majority of comments and the inspection found evidence to indicate that the school holds a number of meetings for parents, including a parents' forum which was introduced recently.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at St Helen's Church of England Primary School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 150 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 257 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	97	65	49	33	4	3	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	104	69	45	30	1	1	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	56	37	86	57	4	3	3	2
My child is making enough progress at this school	64	43	77	51	6	4	2	1
The teaching is good at this school	76	51	72	48	0	0	1	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	63	42	78	52	7	5	1	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	74	49	74	49	1	1	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	63	42	76	51	1	1	1	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	63	42	77	51	6	4	1	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	63	42	77	51	6	4	1	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	52	35	72	48	12	8	1	1
The school is led and managed effectively	75	50	62	41	6	4	2	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	87	58	58	39	4	3	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	51	45	0	4
Primary schools	6	41	42	10
Secondary schools	8	34	44	14
Sixth forms	10	37	50	3
Special schools	32	38	25	5
Pupil referral units	12	43	31	14
All schools	9	40	40	10

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above is for the period 1 September to 31 December 2009 and is the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn term 2009 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement. ■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships. ■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



14 June 2010

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Helen's Church of England Primary School, St Albans, AL4 8AN

We very much enjoyed our visit to your school and thank you for making us feel so welcome. This letter is to tell you about some of the things we found while we were with you. Yours is an excellent school and you are exceptionally good at helping to make it run smoothly. You told us it is also a place where you want to be, make lots of friends, and enjoy taking part in the many interesting and exciting clubs and activities. Almost all your parents are happy with the school as well.

Here are some more important things about your school:

- you make good, and sometimes excellent, progress in lessons and you enjoy your work
- your work is of a high standard and it often shows creativity and imagination
- you are considerate towards each other
- staff take exceptionally good care of you, and make sure that you know exactly what to do to keep safe
- you have an excellent understanding of what makes for a healthy lifestyle and healthy eating.

To make things even better for you, your school has been asked to:

- help you to understand more about people's backgrounds and communities around the world.

You can help by continuing to work hard at the tasks and activities you are given. We wish each one of you every success in your future education and hope that you continue to enjoy learning as much as you do now.

Yours sincerely

Paul Canham

Lead inspector

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