

St Helen's Montessori School

Independent school inspection report

DCSF registration number	886/6113
Unique Reference Number (URN)	131567
URN for registered childcare and social care	EY127587
Inspection number	348787
Inspection dates	24 June 2010
Reporting inspector	Michèle Messaoudi

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 08456 404040, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the information in any way.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 08456 404040
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

No. 090071

© Crown copyright 2009



Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under section 162A of the Education Act 2002¹, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005², the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The inspection of registered provision³ was conducted under Section 49(2) of the Childcare Act 2006.⁴

This was a light touch inspection which focused principally on the quality of education provided by the school; its provision for the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; the arrangements for safeguarding pupils and the improvements the school has made since its last inspection.

Information about the school

St Helen's Montessori School opened as a nursery in 1989 on its current site and was registered as a school in 2006. The school aims to provide 'an ideal learning environment based on Montessori principles that guide and nurture the development of each child's potential to become an informed, active, compassionate and lifelong learner who will make a positive contribution to our global community.' It is a Christian school which admits pupils of all faiths. It is registered for 52 pupils aged between two and 12 years, including a maximum of 32 children under the age of five at any one time. The school is located in a well-adapted coach house in the grounds of the proprietor's house in a rural setting near Maidstone. Some pupils travel to the school from far afield. Pupils have diverse cultural heritages and several speak English as an additional language. There are no children with a statement of special educational needs. Of the 64 pupils on roll, there are 10 pupils aged between five and 11 in the elementary classes and 56 children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (the nursery) aged between two and five years. Of the nursery children, 52 attend part-time and 24 are under the age of three. There are 37 children receiving public funding under the nursery voucher scheme. The school provides care for nursery children for a maximum of one-and-a-half hours in the morning and two hours at the end of each school day. It is registered on the Early Years Register and both the compulsory and voluntary parts of the Childcare Register. The school was last inspected in October 2007.

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_15#sch8

³ Schools which provide childcare for children from birth until the term in which they reach their third birthday must register this provision separately with Ofsted.

⁴ www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2006/ukpga_20060021_en_4#pt3-ch2-pb4-l1g49

Evaluation of the school

St Helen's School provides an outstanding quality of education and meets its aims. Parents and pupils are very positive about the school's work and one parent expresses the views of many in saying, 'St Helen's is a well-run, caring school which provides children with a well-rounded education.' The school is led by a passionate team focused on helping pupils achieve their potential through an outstanding quality of teaching and curriculum, as a result of which pupils make outstanding progress in their learning and in their personal development from the nursery to the elementary classes. Robust safeguarding procedures contribute to the outstanding provision for children's welfare, health and safety. The overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage is good. The school has made good improvements to remedy the deficiencies highlighted in the last inspection report and it now complies with all the regulations for independent schools.

Quality of education

The quality of education, formerly judged to be good, is outstanding. The curriculum is outstanding and serves all pupils extremely well, enabling them to develop a very wide range of basic skills and to nurture personal qualities and talents. In the Early Years Foundation Stage, children learn through a good balance of play activities which they choose for themselves and sessions led by adults. Pupils in the elementary classes particularly appreciate the freedom from rigidly timetabled lessons that enables them to complete activities in greater depth. The breadth of the curriculum encompasses all the areas of the Montessori curriculum, plus drama and chess. In addition, pupils all learn French from the age of three and Latin from the age of eight. Specialist teaching is a strength of the curriculum in French, Latin, drama, music tuition, gardening, chess and swimming. Swimming is offered to children above the age of three years. Pupils' learning records reflect clear progression in the planning of activities and, in the elementary classes, teachers ensure that the National Curriculum attainment targets are covered to prepare pupils well for the next stage of their education.

From the nursery onwards, the curriculum is language-rich and the provision for reading and writing is very strong. There is a strong emphasis on good handwriting, spelling and grammar. Pupils have numerous opportunities for creative writing and demonstrate excellent literacy and imaginative skills when composing poems on specific themes. Their speaking and listening skills are extremely well promoted through storytelling and drama. Provision for mathematics is also very strong, and pupils' learning is supported very effectively by the full range of Montessori sensorial equipment. Provision for science is good and develops pupils' enquiry skills effectively. Project work provides ample scope for links between history and geography and various areas of the curriculum. Pupils in the elementary classes use information and communication technology (ICT) to research their project work. Nursery children use a wide range of ICT equipment to support their learning,

including cameras, tape recorders with headphones, and electronic robots. The curriculum is enriched by a good programme of educational visits and events. Pupils learn to play the recorder and the piano and all participate in the annual music and drama concert. The school choir performs to the public during end-of-term events. As the school day is long and pupils travel from far afield, the school provides only two after-school clubs for children above the age of four years, French and judo. Personal, social and health education is very strong, and taught through life-skills and practical life activities, the grace and courtesy programme and the school's ethos.

Teaching and assessment are outstanding and enable pupils to make outstanding progress in their learning and personal development. Throughout the school, teachers are Montessori-trained and very skilful at meeting the needs of each child and each pupil by establishing positive relationships and carefully preparing the learning environment to facilitate the harmonious growth of all the potentialities of the child. They engage very effectively with pupils through questioning and discussion to promote their thinking skills, ensure that they develop good understanding of the subject and encourage perseverance. They know when not to intervene, namely when a pupil is engrossed in a task using the appropriate Montessori resources to overcome fresh challenges. The high staff-to-pupil ratio enables staff to closely monitor the progress of individual pupils throughout the day and to ensure that time is managed wisely. In the nursery, the teaching is good and meets the needs of individual children well because it uses information from observations of children's play and learning to carefully craft what is most appropriate to the child's next stage of development. Pupils in the elementary classes gain a clear picture of the progress they make through verbal feedback from teachers and comparisons with national norms. However, there are missed opportunities to develop peer assessment when pupils work as a group. Parents feel well informed of their children's progress through detailed annual reports, formal meetings and the 'open door' approach.

By the age of 11, pupils achieve very highly in reading, writing and mathematics and are successful in gaining a place in the secondary school of their parents' choice.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

The school has further developed its provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development since the last inspection and it is now outstanding. The personal development of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage is outstanding. Pupils thoroughly enjoy school and their attendance is very high. The staff are excellent role models who painstakingly ensure that the learning environment is always presented in an orderly and immaculate condition. Consequently, pupils of all ages show exceptionally high levels of respect and responsibility for their environment and for the school community. They replace resources exactly in their place after use. They are very polite, considerate, thoughtful and reflective. They display very high levels of self-discipline and concentration in their work, and their

behaviour is outstanding. Their exceptionally high degree of self-confidence is reflected in the assurance with which they express their views and tackle challenging tasks. Pupils develop very positive relationships which support their learning and they enjoy the happy family atmosphere created by the school. They have numerous opportunities for reflection during activities and assemblies.

Pupils are very actively involved in school life from the nursery onwards. They feed the chickens and cats, tidy up the grounds and classrooms, fill up the water filter, change calendars, water the garden, write for the newsletter and lead assemblies. They look out for each other. Pupils contribute to the local community by participating in termly concerts and plays to which local people are invited and in chess tournaments against another school. They also support global charities, for example by making and selling cakes to raise funds for the Haiti appeal. Provision for pupils' cultural and multicultural education is good and effectively supported by resources and educational visits. Pupils learn about public institutions, diverse cultures and religions through their project work and educational visits which include a few days in France.

The excellent basic skills which pupils develop, coupled with their very high level of competence as independent learners or team workers, prepare them exceptionally well for their future lives and education.

Safeguarding pupils' welfare, health and safety

Provision is outstanding for pupils' welfare, health and safety, including for the children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Safeguarding arrangements are robust, underpinned by the thorough implementation of the essential policies aimed at minimising risks in all circumstances. Rigorous recruitment procedures ensure that all the required checks are carried out on the proprietor and on staff to determine their suitability to work with children. These are duly recorded in a single central register. The staff receive the appropriate level of training in child protection at the prescribed intervals. All staff have first aid training with paediatric qualifications. Accidents, fire safety checks, risk assessments before educational visits and risk assessments of the premises and activities are meticulously recorded. Parents have full confidence in the school's systems to safeguard their children.

Pupils settle in quickly and feel very safe because of the outstanding care which they receive. They say that there is absolutely no bullying in school. They demonstrate an exceptionally high level of responsibility towards others. They understand that daily hygiene routines, a well-balanced diet, drinking plenty of water during the day and exercising daily are key to keeping healthy. From the nursery onwards, they enjoy the wide range of physical activities on offer, especially as the school now provides for vigorous play both indoors and outdoors, which was identified as an area for improvement in the last inspection.

The school now has a three-year plan showing how it will fulfil its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, amended, which it did not have at the time of the last inspection.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

The overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage is good because the leadership and the provision are good. Nevertheless, the outcomes for all the children are outstanding as the well-qualified staff are highly effective in promoting children's welfare and in ensuring that the needs of the individual child are met exceptionally well. Consequently, children make outstanding progress in their learning and personal development. By the age of five, they exceed the expected goals in communication, language and literacy, physical, and personal, social and emotional development. Safeguarding procedures are robust. The morning and afternoon care provision makes a good contribution to children's emotional well-being and social skills. The under-threes provision meets the requirements of the Early Years Register. These children thoroughly enjoy their time at school and fit in well with the older nursery children.

The very close partnerships between parents and the school ensure that children's needs are identified early and regularly reviewed. The range of resources and the provision for multicultural education have improved since the last inspection and the nursery classrooms reflect linguistic and cultural diversity and support indoor learning extremely well. However, the range of outdoor learning activities does not fully complement the very good indoor range. A process of continuous assessment of each child's progress in all the areas of the Montessori curriculum informs the planning of daily activities. However, the use and analysis of information from assessments is not sufficiently developed to help staff closely monitor each child's progress against the expected goals of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework. Self-review is accurate and the nursery leader encourages staff to be reflective but as yet, not all are fully involved in the process.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended January 2005.

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- Develop peer assessment as a strategy to involve pupils more deeply in the assessment of their own learning and further enhance their critical thinking skills.

- In the nursery, further develop the use and analysis of assessment information to help staff closely monitor each child's progress against the expected goals of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework.
- Further develop the range of outdoor learning activities provided for nursery children to complement the very good indoor range.

Inspection judgement recording form

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
-------------	------	--------------	------------

The quality of education

Overall quality of education	✓			
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils	✓			
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs	✓			
How well pupils make progress in their learning	✓			

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	✓			
The behaviour of pupils	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils	✓			
--	---	--	--	--

The quality of the Early Years Foundation Stage provision

How good are the outcomes for children in the EYFS?	✓			
What is the quality of provision in the EYFS?		✓		
How effectively is the EYFS led and managed?		✓		
Overall effectiveness: how well does the school meet the needs of children in the EYFS?		✓		

School details

Name of school	St Helen's Montessori School		
DCSF number	886/6113		
Unique Reference Number (URN)	131567		
EY URN (for registered childcare only)	EY127587		
Type of school	Montessori day nursery and primary school		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1989		
Age range of pupils	2–11 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 8	Girls: 4	Total: 12
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 26	Girls: 26	Total: 52
Number of pupils aged 0-3 in registered childcare provision	Boys: 10	Girls: 14	Total: 24
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day pupils)	£6,460 in the primary; £17 per session in the Early Years Foundation Stage		
Annual fees (childcare)	£17 per session (£6,460 per annum if full-time)		
Address of school	St Helen's Lower Road East Farleigh Maidstone Kent ME15 0JT		
Telephone number	01622 721731		
Email address	jeannelleds@talktalk.net		
Headteacher	Jeanelle Dening-Smitherman		
Proprietor	Jeanelle Dening-Smitherman		
Reporting inspector	Michèle Messaoudi		
Date of inspection	24 June 2010		